

American performers, music unite in MSO finale

Pianist Jeffrey Biegel headlines with symphony

By GREG WAXBERG
Special to Northeast Ledger

Talk about variety: The United States Bicentennial, an Italian opera, the Bible and an outlaw in the Old West inspired the four American works that the Mississippi Symphony Orchestra will perform Friday.

Music Director Crafton Beck will conduct *A Star-Studded Closing*, the orchestra's final "Bravo!" concert of the season, at 7:30 p.m. at Thalia Mara Hall in Jackson.

The program opens with *Celebration*, by Adolphus Hailstork, commissioned by the J.C. Penney Company in 1974. It was written for high school orchestras and their battery of percussion players, and it launched Hailstork's career.

Speaking of favorable beginnings, Ruggero Leoncavallo's opera *Pagliacci* inspired George Gershwin's lyricist to write a jazz opera in the same style. That jazz opera gave rise to a jazz piece for orchestra, *Rhapsody in Blue*, which prompted a commission for Gershwin's first symphonic concerto.

Thus, next on the evening's program will be the *Piano Concerto in F*, featuring Jeffrey Biegel.

He finds a great deal of excitement in the concerto's themes, rhythms and poignant writing for the soloist.

"It is a wonderful concerto which has become part of the pianist repertoire, and I always love performing it wherever I am



File photo

The symphony will also tune in and team up with choirs from four Mississippi universities.

DETAILS

- ▶ *A Star-Studded Closing*, the orchestra's final "Bravo!" concert of the season is at 7:30 p.m. at Thalia Mara Hall in Jackson.
- ▶ For tickets and information, call (601) 960-1565 or visit www.msorchestra.com.

asked to do so," Biegel said.

After the intermission, four choirs will join the orchestra for Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, Biblical texts in Hebrew. The "Chichester" of the title is Chichester Cathedral in Sussex, England; its dean commissioned the piece for a summer festival with the combined male choirs of the Cathedrals of Chichester, Winchester and Salisbury. Typical of Bernstein, parts of the work could be at home on Broadway, while others fit a church setting.

The performance will showcase the Delta State University Chorale, Mississippi College Singers, University of Mississippi Concert Singers and University of Southern Mississippi Chorale. The concert is Friday night to accommodate their schedules.

"This concert represents a coming together of choruses from Ole Miss, Delta State and USM, which we have been working toward for three years," Beck said. "It is part of an annual statewide collaboration they have. The top choir from each school will sing with us."

A boy soprano joins the choirs in the second movement because, instead of an adult female, Bernstein wanted the angelic, pure and innocent sound of a boy. Thirteen-year-old David Ruffner Mandt, a head chorister of the Birmingham Boys Choir, will perform.

To close the program, cowboy songs abound in the suite from Aaron Copland's

ballet *Billy the Kid*, named for the outlaw William H. Bonney. Lincoln Kirstein, head of American Ballet Caravan, didn't want the company to present another Russian piece and persuaded Copland to use cowboy songs and write about the West.

Copland's ballet, like the other works on the program, celebrates the different sounds and rhythms of American music — ranging from the peace of the land to dancing to a gun battle.

"I love the American collaborations we have formed for this program," Michael Beattie, president and executive director of the symphony, said. "Not only are we using music of American composers, but we have with us several generations of Americans in the performance, all the way from boy soprano David Mandt, through the choirs ... and finally with American pianist Jeffrey Biegel."