

## CityPulse

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# Played twice

**Muffitt milks a creamy concert with rare encore**

*by Lawrence Cosentino*

There's a smug glow in your eye when you're belly-rubbing your dog into oblivion. Similar looks are sometimes seen in the bedroom. "See what I can do to you," the look says.

Maestro Timothy Muffitt can be forgiven for exhibiting that look after the Lansing Symphony and two guest trumpeters kicked out a spectacular double concerto to bring Friday's concert to a finish.

Trumpets weren't the only thing that came in twos that night. For the first time in Muffitt's three-year tenure in Lansing, he repeated the last few minutes of a serious work, just for kicks. The climax of Stephen Paulus' double concerto, with both trumpeters and an extra big symphony spiraling into the stratosphere, was too sweet a ride to ditch.

One-more-time indulgences worked great for Count Basie and "April in Paris," but they're rare in the classical world. Critics rolled their eyes when Leonard Bernstein used to reprise his orgasmic presto from Tchaikovsky's "Pathetique" symphony. (Audiences loved it.)

Until Friday, it was hard to picture Muffitt, with his sequoia-like dignity, giving in to his inner Rockette, but this was new, serious and crowd-pleasing music — an extremely rare hat trick in any symphony hall.

The freshness of the high-energy concerto, premiered in 2003, seemed to have the audience on a nitrous oxide high. Minutes before the end, guest trumpeters Rex Richardson and Vincent DeMartino blew themselves argyle in the face with an improvised high-note joust, egged on by a thundering battery of percussion.

The two-ness of the soloists threw an intriguing wild card into the deal.

At first, the trumpeters' role was less instrumental than elemental. As the concerto built slowly into a Himalayan range of sunrise chords, the trumpeters fired sharp phrases into the valley, like hawks calling from neighboring crags.

Suddenly, they took flight, pouring out extended, high tones of breathtaking beauty, often together, sometimes diverging into harmony.

The pulsations and surges kept on mounting and receding, climbing higher each time, until the mad improvisation section was over and Muffitt moved in for the kill. Unnoticed amid the tumult, extra horn players snuck into the wings to build up a surround-sound effect. After two standingovation callbacks, nobody was leaving the Wharton Center. Grins were everywhere. Something out of the ordinary seemed called for.

When the last ovation began to recede, Muffitt waved at his wingmen not to leave their posts.

“I need you, too,” he called out.

It was fun to hear his voice from the podium, and even more fun to see his posture during the trumpet battle — hands behind his back, resting on the rails of his podium, moving his rear end up and down.

Even Muffitt came in twos. He was beside himself with exhilaration.

He was enjoying his job a little more than usual, for several reasons. With two trumpets on solo duty, balance wasn't a concern. Muffitt could let the orchestra go nuts, knowing that everyone would still hear DeMartino and Richardson just fine.

Best of all, the music was wowing everybody, from subscription blue-hairs to college kids on reluctant assignment, and the orchestra was clearly grooving on the feedback loop. The barrier between musicians and listeners evaporated because of real communion, not some awkward on-stage repartee.

So give Muffitt his fun. He has proven his seriousness and high musicianship over and over. Before the trumpet concerto Friday, he led a masterful performance of Mendelssohn's "Scottish" Symphony that relied entirely on craftsmanship and heart — no bifurcated soloists, no novelty factor, no augmented percussion, just seamless, organic transitions and superb section work from everybody. At the next subscription concert, he'll head back to the mines with his biggest challenge to Lansing's orchestra yet — Mahler's mighty Fifth Symphony.

There's a snob classical-music prejudice that if people enjoy something too much too fast, it must be second-rate. Friday's big fun was a powerful counter-argument. At the apogee of the Muffitt era, only my thesaurus, greased and creased with the search for new superlatives, is suffering. Face it — we're in the m.f. (that's mezzoforte) golden age of the Lansing Symphony. With each

performance, the orchestra seems to surpass itself in excitement, precision and power. If it gives, and gets, some instant gratification along the way, that can't be helped.