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Orchestrated entanglements

Boulder author sets music to words in first novel

By **Wes Blomster**, Camera Classical Music Critic
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Limestone Concerto by Wallace Westfeldt. MudBug Press, 272 pp. \$17.95.

"Limestone Concerto" — at the outset — seems a happily sophisticated companion piece to "Mozart in the Jungle," Blair Tindall's 2005 tell-all account of life backstage on America's classical-music scene.

In this, his first novel, Boulder's Wallace Westfeldt takes an in-depth look at the Indianapolis Symphony, which in the '60s was one of the 10 best orchestras in the nation, thanks — as Westfeldt tells it — to fictional conductor Leon Zellingari.

But not far into the story Westfeldt turns into a master of narrative counterpoint, weaving violent events of that era into a story that ends with the attempted murder of an attractive Czech cellist, a refugee from her communist homeland.

Along the way a score is stolen; there's a corpse in a quarry; and JFK is assassinated.

Westfeldt dishes himself up a full plate and then manages this heap of incidents with impressive agility. And although the book is officially a work of fiction, the real-life counterparts of many of his characters are easily identified by readers who know the author.

The real-life Zellingari was St. Paul-born Izler Solomon (1910-1987), an early director of the Aspen Music Festival and from 1956 to 1976 conductor of the Indianapolis Symphony. Solomon was then married to Betty Weems, a prominent patron of music in Boulder throughout her life here.

As a teenager, Westfeldt, Weems' son, lived in the Solomon home in Indianapolis. His experiences of that time are the seed from which "Limestone Concerto" grew.

"I was surrounded by world-class musicians, often our house guests," says the former high-tech marketing manager. "And I went along on the trip to Carnegie Hall that contributed much to the Symphony's reputation."

An account of the New York visit is included in the novel.

The Russian pianist who performs with Zellingari in Indianapolis was Vladimir Ashkenazy, who did indeed arrive in this country with a huge KGB escort. (Later in the year the pianist defected and settled in Iceland.)

Westfeldt began work on the book two years ago, moved to do so by parallels between the '60s and today.

"There was a lot of violence then — just as there is now," he says. "But there is a difference.

"In the midst of the assassinations, Vietnam and church bombings, there was an intense desire not to be violent. I'm not sure we have that desire today.

"We had our Martin Luther Kings and we had hope. Civilization was more than a marketing tool. I look at the world today and I question our ability to be civilized."

Westfeldt remembers Indianapolis' Campbell Hall, home of the orchestra, as "a sanctuary of civilization," violated in the story by an act of political violence.

"It was the beginning of our loss of innocence," he says, recalling the '60s as a period that began with great liberal optimism versus conservative paranoia and ended with conservative optimism weakly countered by liberal paranoia.

Although first drafts of "Limestone Concerto" were titled "Maestro," Westfeldt stresses that Zellingari, although the central figure in the story, is not its protagonist.

That role goes to Jed Norton, a violist from southern Indiana and an American innocent entangled in the machinations of the John Birch Society.

Each section of the novel opens with a reference to a particular work of music, which — ideally — would be assigned listening while reading the book.

"I listened to music 90 percent of the time that I was writing," Westfeldt says, noting that he has considered producing a CD to go with the book. Rights, however, make this an overly complex project.

Westfeldt writes with ease, and "Limestone Concerto" is engaging reading, made compelling by its contemporary relevance.

Yet, it must be stressed that the book is clearly a work of fiction, for a music critic in it is named Blomster.

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