

# In Fairfax, two rising classical stars light up a new concerto



*“...a uniquely gifted composer...”*

## The Washington Post

Review by **Michael Andor Brodeur**

# The Fairfax Symphony Orchestra gave the world premiere of Malek Jandali's *'Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra'* with clarinetist Anthony McGill

This not-quite-post-covid classical landscape is one defined by uncertainties, and for a regional nonprofit like **Fairfax Symphony Orchestra**, it would be very easy to lean in on the easy, stocking its seasonal stables with war horses just to keep the seats full.

But among the things to admire about the **FSO** is its commitment to variety. Avoiding the obvious seems like a guiding principle for conductor and music director **Christopher Zimmerman**, who reliably and artfully balances *"give them what they want"* with *"show them what they might."*

Saturday night's concert at **George Mason University's Center for the Arts** represented a particularly well-struck balance: two sizable portions of music from Syrian American composer **Malek Jandali**, including the world premiere of his *"Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra,"* followed by a heroic dose of **Beethoven**.

*"Germany has Beethoven,"* an audience member tapped me to tell me after the concert, *"Syria has Malek."*

She was one of a healthy representation of Syrian listeners in attendance, there for Jandali's unique alchemy of European classical structures and Syrian architectural details.



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Jandali, 51, is a prolific composer whose symphonies and concertos incorporate Arabic maqams (or modes) into a blend that resists transparent fusion, achieving something more akin to keen self-portraiture, even when the lens faces outward. **Marin Alsop** described Jandali as “among the superb composer poets of our time,” and the p-word isn’t just thrown in there.

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Before the orchestra started in on three excerpted movements from Jandali's sixth symphony, *"The Desert Rose,"* the composer himself emerged onstage holding its inspiration in his hand: a palm-size desert rose, an intricately layered formation of gypsum, barite and sand created through extensive shaping by wind, water and pressure, which takes the unlikely and uncanny form of a fully bloomed rose.

Though we heard only parts of it, Jandali's symphony adopts a similar approach, arranging timbral bouquets whose colors play against each other in surprising and genuinely alluring ways. A *"Praise"* movement commenced a steady rhythm from the percussion section that would undergird the entire work. Lowing strings and luminous horns were punctuated by brisk xylophones. Though it all sounded lovely, it also sounded as if it could have been sewn together a bit more tightly.

The *"Ardah"* movement – the fifth in the symphony – was beautifully wrought, its scrim of strings cut through withwry trombone and violin solos, and unexpected bursts of power. Playful oboes, huffing piccolos and a knocking woodblock lent an appropriately childlike aspect to the *"Fete,"* its scribbles of trumpet leading to a tug of war between brass and strings. A stirring buildup tapered into a folk-infused dance that also felt like refined but celebratory minimalism. I'd have liked to hear the whole thing.

This trio of selections was followed by the premiere of Jandali's concerto for clarinet and orchestra, composed for visiting soloist **Anthony McGill**, principal clarinet for the **New York Philharmonic**. If it doesn't seem so typical to hear of an orchestra's clarinetist rising into a level of renown bordering on name recognition, it's because it's not. McGill is an extraordinary player, with a quiver of skills and a palette of colors that only buttress what is a singular sensibility toward his instrument. The man is an artist.



And if there's an indication above the sound of Jandali's music itself that suggests *he's a uniquely gifted composer*, it's in his ability to take full advantage of McGill's abilities. The three movements of the concerto indulge McGill's chops and leave ample room for his clarity and expressive range. The opening, "*Andantino misterioso*," leaned in to its mystery, with McGill emerging from a tangle of tentative bassoons, flutes, oboes and sneaky harps. Soft gongs, gasping strings and muted trumpets contributed to a *Stravinskian lushness*, with McGill issuing low rattles, fleet-fingered runs and lithe lines over a subtly plucked ostinato.

The moody "*Nocturne*" that followed found McGill passing lines back to the bassoons under long shadows of violins and viola. Jandali never forces McGill's virtuosity, opting instead for a cinematic treatment that allows the fresh sketch of a main character. A closing "*Allegro moderato*" was sparse and severe to start, but filled in its own blank with stabs of strings and tumbling drums. (The entire FSO percussion section, it should be noted, worked its mallets off all night.)

A crisscross of darting piccolo and nimble bassoons brought us to McGill's final cadenza, *a thrilling soliloquy that moved with liquid ease* through jazz-tinted voicings and angular simplicity. A thickening haze of strings tightened into a bursting climax. It felt like something had been launched.

Seemingly girded by intermission, pretty much everyone returned for the Beethoven.

The Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 55, more handily known as the "*Eroica*," was originally composed for and subsequently de-dedicated to Napoleon – who, turns out, was awful. My memory has barely stowed this most heroic of symphonies after the recent electrifying account offered by the **National Symphony Orchestra** before heading off on its recent European tour. The Third is always going to be a hill to climb.

Beethoven himself cautioned in the symphony's 1806 score that the hulking symphony "*should be performed nearer the beginning rather than at the end of a concert*" due to its unruly length. "*If it is heard too late it will lose for the listener, already tired by previous performances, its own proposed effect.*" As much as I admire Ludwig's audacity, we're never not going to put the Third last. Last is simply where it goes. Opening a program with the "*Eroica*" is like serving one's steak before one's soup; sure, it's all going to the same place, but it makes no sense. Thus, the heroism of the Third always bears the burden of finale: It can never bephoned in; it must always slay.

And it didn't, quite. One advantage of an orchestra playing new music is that we can only compare it with itself, right there, as it's happening. The Third, meanwhile, can only be compared with every other Third we've ever heard, and it may have been too big a bite for the FSO on Saturday. Its "*Allegro con brio*" was a bit big on the brio – the sync of the strings slightly smudged, the little tempests of the movement never gathering enough force.

Lovely work by the woodwinds was often trodden over by other sections. And although the strings cleaned up their act by the end of the movement, there was a struggle throughout to keep Beethoven's busy designs suspended into a whole. Zimmerman brings arresting energy to his performance, but I often wondered whether he was hearing the same symphony we were.

The second movement's "*Marcia funebre*" similarly sounded like too heavy a carry, its parts struggling to cohere —though there was the pleasant side effect of seeing the assembly of the composer's handiwork. It's an orchestra with plenty of fabulous players, but too often the music felt like a fire in danger of going out.

The energy was restored by a beefy, vivacious scherzo, boosted by sturdy bassoons and a gorgeous trio of horns. And the "*Allegro molto*" finale found each section operating in more exacting fashion, with beautiful sound coming from the violas and cellos, and the woodwinds shining bright.

My quibbles with the performance — some inelegant asides, some dropped comic timing — may well be among those issues that have zero impact on a casual listener seeking a worthwhile, ear-opening orchestral experience. And that's fair enough. The FSO routinely does more than most regional orchestras dare, and that counts as its own type of heroism.

