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MUSIC

Composer uses sweet melodies, symbolism

STEVEN BROWN

Midway through "Mill Village: A Piedmont Rhapsody," there comes a moment that could make long-ago millworkers feel as much at home as modern-day urbanites.

"Amazing Grace" emerges from the chamber orchestra -- a reminiscence of the churches that helped hold mill-town life together. It's easily the best-known of several venerable tunes composer David Crowe borrows.

But he enriches it in an unexpected way: by combining it with "Barbara Allen," a Scottish ballad of ill-fated love.

Writing a ballet score several years ago for Moving Poets Theatre of Dance, Crowe said, he found that the two melodies harmonized. During work on "Mill Village," he brought an adaptation of that piece for former millworkers to hear -- just as a sample of his work.

"The folks there ... just loved it. 'Oh, that was my mother's favorite song. You *have* to put it in the piece.' So I re-orchestrated it and put it in," Crowe said.

Fewer listeners will recognize melodies Crowe borrowed from songs of the union movement, such as Dorsey Dixon's "Weave Room Blues."

Since "Mill Village" is for 11 instruments -- no singers -- the audiences won't hear its words about "Working in a weave room, fighting for my life, trying to make a living for my kiddies and my wife."

But the beginning and end of the piece don't need words. At the start, the 11 musicians enter one at a time and join in with the throb of an old recording of a mill machine. At the end, they reverse the process -- leaving one by one until the stage is empty.

The symbolism is hard to miss. Steven

Brown

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