

Style

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On the Downbeat: Up-and-Coming Conductors

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After three weeks of honing their baton techniques (not to mention their administrative skills and marketing strategies), the four graduates of the National Symphony Orchestra's second annual National Conducting Institute led the NSO in a Millennium Stage concert Saturday night at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall. It was their first hands-on experience with an orchestra of international caliber.

It was no surprise that the orchestra played beautifully for these budding maestros: The works on the program were familiar warhorses for the NSO. More to the point, the four graduates have a good deal of experience as music directors of student, part-time professional, community or youth orchestras around the country. And Leonard Slatkin has been standing over their shoulders at every step of the rehearsal process.

Paul Haas conducted Copland's "El Salon Mex-

ico" in a reading that was honest and precise, reflected in the scrupulous cut-and-thrust of his baton work. The performance was a little short on abandon but had plenty of seductive color, and Copland's devilish syncopations were articulated with crystal clarity.

Awadagin Pratt's podium manner was showier and more free-form. This high-profile concert pianist—with three Peabody degrees in violin, piano and conducting—led Beethoven's Eighth Symphony sans baton, beating time with theatri-



COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Paul Haas, one of four National Conducting Institute graduates spotlighted Saturday.

cal flourishes and a minimum of specific cueing. Still, Pratt's safe, middle-of-the-road performance sounded leagues away from his idiosyncratic personality when playing piano.

The true stars of the evening followed intermission. Kenneth Woods was confident on the podium, clear and economical in his gestures, and knew when to actively lead and when to allow his players freedom to phrase. He delivered a Strauss "Till Eulenspiegel" brimming with personality, affection and freshly imagined drama. Every moment was alive and engaging, and the riotous complexity of the score was rendered with admirable coherence.

Eugene Fredrick Castillo was no less persuasive in Ravel's "Daphnis and Chloe" Suite No. 2. Shaped with a sure sense of line and a beautifully gauged climactic build, the music unfolded with sultry languor, its busy inner lines glowing but always intelligible. Castillo sculpted the air (both with and without baton) in sweeping, emotionally communicative arcs, driving the finale to an ecstatic white heat.