

## Huntsville Symphony Orchestra Classical 1: Review

(September 13, 2008)

The CERN supercollider has nothing on the Huntsville Symphony Orchestra. Saturday evening, the Von Braun Center Concert Hall hosted a trio of forces which combined for a powerful performance and the musical equivalent of a nuclear particle accelerator. In this case, the particles were Huntsville's darling, soprano Susanna Phillips, conductor Carlos Prieto, and the music of Richard Strauss.

Ms. Phillips, giving her final Alabama performance before her Metropolitan Opera debut in December, scaled the heights of Strauss' *Four Last Songs* with elegance and sensitivity. The sublime music was handled reverently by a sophisticated Phillips, whose approach was both gentle and patient-never forced.

Smartly accompanied by Mr. Prieto and the orchestra, the *Songs* were delivered convincingly, albeit hurriedly at times. The romantic horn playing by Gordon James at the end of the second movement turned out to be just the beginning of a stunning performance for James and the entire battery of horns. A dripping third movement violin solo amidst the somber tone of the movement was both inspiring and hopeful – much as the flute trills were a refreshing and welcome addition to the texture of the fourth.

Joining Ms. Phillips on the transcendent journey through Strauss' *Songs*, was tireless conductor, Carlos Prieto, a rising star in Mexico and the US. Batonless through the first half of the program, Mr. Prieto commanded what might be the most powerful and mature HSO to date in the second half.

Following an intermission, Mr. Prieto and the orchestra summoned their energies for the daunting, mega-tone poem, *Ein Heldenleben (A Hero's Life)*. *Ein Heldenleben* is a sprawling, autobiographical Strauss masterwork in six sections portraying a hero, his adversaries, his struggles, his peace and his fulfillment. The orchestra appropriately dedicated this performance of *A Hero's Life* to the memory of Tom Mitchell, a Huntsville musical hero and HSO trombonist of 31 years who passed away last February.

The augmented horn section unapologetically delivered the hero's theme in the first movement, while the woodwinds comically contributed a devilishly difficult second movement theme with virtuosity and flare. An extended and wonderful violin solo in the third movement was set off by crisp articulations from the trumpets, bold playing from the brasses, and a gutsy, even raucous fourth movement which was at once offensive and spectacular; brash, yet stunning – the likes of which the VBC probably hasn't heard since *The Rite of Spring*.

*Ein Heldenleben's* fifth and sixth sections worked toward a peaceful and noble conclusion, marking a rapturous and inspired performance. After an extended ovation, Mr. Prieto returned to the stage to acknowledge the orchestra for the last time. Upon arriving at the podium, he quickly flashed a photo toward the orchestra which was met with adoring expressions. It was a photo of Tom. His colleagues had succeeded in telling his story. The story of *A Hero's Life*.

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