

## Huntsville Symphony Orchestra Classical 2: Review

(November 8, 2008)

The Huntsville Symphony Orchestra's Saturday evening program, "Legends of Russia," amounted to two parts vodka, one part tonic, and a dash of ironic. The program opened with Borodin's beloved "Polovtsian Dances" and concluded with Prokofiev's epic cantata, "Alexander Nevsky" from the film of the same name in which the title hero rises to legendary status upon expelling Germanic invaders from Russia. Stalin commissioned the propaganda film as Russian-German relations deteriorated during Hitler's rise to power. The irony was palpable in the Wernher Von Braun Center, a venue named for Huntsville's most famous citizen, a German rocket-scientist and central figure in early German rocket development.

The "Alexander Nevsky" score for chorus, solo voice, and orchestra was well-handled by an adroit Carlos Prieto who managed a moody performance, employing the full range of the orchestra's capabilities to shout angrily and whisper ominously. Also contributing to the powerful performance of the Prokofiev was the combined choirs of the Huntsville Community Chorus, the UAH Concert Choir, and the UNA Collegiate Singers. Under the direction of chorus master, Billy Orton and conductors, Erin Colwitz and Ian Loeppky, the chorus navigated the difficult Russian text while contributing significantly to the grandeur of the music – especially so during the heroic moments of the fourth movement, "Arise Ye Russian People."

Perhaps the most beautiful music of the night, however, was to be found in the bleak sixth movement, "The Field of the Dead." Set off by pleading strings and hymn-like harmonies, mezzo soprano Margaret Lattimore's velvety voice dripped with anguish. The thin scoring of the movement allowed for the exposure of the most sure-handed string playing of the season. Rich and sonorous, the strings and Ms. Lattimore were a perfect match.

Overall, the Prokofiev was well done. The excellent solo playing throughout was occasionally countered by some less-inspiring section work - most notably an overzealous low brass section in the third movement, and an awkward moment for the usually-stellar woodwinds in the seventh. "Nevsky" ended nobly, summoning the combined powers of the orchestra and chorus for a grand Russian ending.

Situated on the program between two Russian masterworks was the world premiere of a new work by Estonian-born composer and Huntsville resident, Taavo Virkhaus. Virkhaus, emeritus conductor of the Huntsville Symphony Orchestra, dedicated his Symphony No. 6 to the HSO and its conductor, Carlos Prieto. Subtitled, "The Huntsville Symphony," Virkhaus's four-movement tribute to the rocket city weaves together a rhythmic motive based upon the city's "the sky is not the limit" motto. The first movement began boldly, giving way to a reflective second movement and a whimsical third movement. In the fourth movement, a fugue is rescued by the theme whose final, hammering chords are as majestic as the Saturn V itself. The thunderous music was met with roaring applause – another great blastoff for Huntsville, where indeed, the sky is not the limit.

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