

## Huntsville Symphony Orchestra Classical 3: Review

(January 24, 2009)

"I stand here today humbled by the task before us." These first words of President Obama's inaugural address could certainly have served as Maestro Prieto's opening comments at Saturday evening's performance of the Huntsville Symphony Orchestra. The concert was the first of two all-Beethoven programs, spanning two symphonies and two piano concerti. Such programming, even for major orchestras, is both bold and rare. The concept, audacious yet inspiring; naive yet brilliant was a fitting end to a week of lofty rhetoric. Likewise, the delivery of the music was at times as majestic as the Presidential Inauguration and as clumsy as the Oath of Office.

To be sure, Mr. Prieto was humbled by the task at hand this weekend as the orchestral works of Beethoven, due to their sheer repertory prestige, are some of the most difficult orchestral music to perform. The program began, somewhat timidly, with the "Coriolan Overture" before moving to the highlight of the evening in the "Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Major" with Dubravka Tomsic, soloist.

Ms. Tomsic, a protégé of Artur Schnabel, performed Saturday evening with an artful intelligence that captivated the audience and invigorated the orchestra. Despite her romantic approach to interpretation, the performance was earnest and never self-indulgent. While the fluid tempi of the first movement were at times a struggle for an impatient orchestra, her second movement was dark, somber, and thoughtful. The third and final movement was one of irresistible energy coupled with a rare technical elegance, making even difficult passages sound miraculously melodic. The concerto concluded convincingly, leaving a breathless audience standing in amazement.

After an intermission the orchestra returned for the "Seventh Symphony" in the happy key of A Major. Throughout this symphony, Beethoven's skillful and novel use of the winds to anchor the orchestral sound worked well for the HSO whose string section, with the exception of the first few stands, underperformed all night. Beautiful woodwind moments were in abundance in the first movement - especially for the oboe, bassoon, and clarinet solis and the treacherous, yet perfect octaves of the flute, oboe and violins just before the finale. The riveting opening bars of the second movement were again in the safe hands of the woodwinds and horns while the strings squabbled about the articulation of one of the most famous melodies ever written.

Nonetheless, the third and fourth movements, "Presto" and "Allegro con brio," respectively, pushed ahead bravely and were engaging, exciting, gutsy, and unabashed...and as big and fun as Aretha Franklin's hat!

*Dave Ragsdale is an Asst. Professor of Music at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. He holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Instrumental Conducting from the University of Miami.*