

Huntsville Symphony Orchestra Classical 4: Review

(February 14, 2009)

Love is patient and kind...and so was the Huntsville Symphony Orchestra toward guest conductor Mikhail Agrest during Saturday evening's Valentine concert at the Von Braun Center Concert Hall.

The program began, curiously, with Schumann's optimistic "Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major" (the same key as Beethoven's upbeat third symphony, "Eroica," a similarly hopeful work from an otherwise depressed composer). Overall, the symphony was beautiful and well-played, yet suffered from a reserved, cautious, and uncharacteristically restrained interpretation which was neither fast nor slow, soft nor loud, boring nor inspiring.

The conservative first movement was highlighted by the confident sounds of the horns – the oft-relied upon section for the orchestral hero role - which were in top form throughout the evening. The second movement was beautiful, yet disastrously metered and unwavering while the third movement withheld sensitivity until the final sweet tones of the woodwinds. The religious fourth movement was dark, sonorous and well-paced, leaving the audience craving the fiery fifth movement which, after a seemingly protracted wind-up, delivered a buoyant and convincing finish.

The second half of the program opened with Stravinsky's "Pulcinella Suite" which, except for some terrific solo moments from the oboe, bassoon, and trumpet, was largely unremarkable and the apparent cause for a last-minute change in program order.

The beloved Grieg "Piano Concerto in A minor" (the Norwegian composer's only piano concerto) closed the program with guest artist Anne-Marie McDermott at the piano. Ms. McDermott is an undoubtedly skilled player, with impressive technique, but her pointed and bony approach to the instrument stretched beyond articulate, betraying the romanticism inherent to the piece and even her own musicianship.

The Grieg concerto was a favorite of Rachmaninoff and Liszt and holds a keystone position within the great romantic piano tradition, yet Ms. McDermott insisted on a technical clarity usually reserved for Bach and the angularity of Stravinsky.

The fiery first movement was a technical wonder, accompanied by a sensitive and clearly reverent orchestra. The second movement began warmly, with some of the richest string playing of the season, while the third and final movement was met with instant ovation from a grateful audience.

Overall, the fourth installment of the HSO's six-concert Classical Series was a resounding success, but not for the usual reasons. Typically, a charming and effusive Carlos Prieto is able to inspire the orchestra to play beyond its potential, while guest artists wow the audience with virtuosity. Yet on this occasion, the opposite occurred; the orchestra in many ways carried the conductor and reached further than even the soloist. The significance of the evening was found in the collective musicianship of the orchestra itself – not in its association with any one person.

Love is patient and kind. Love is not proud. Except this time.

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