

Huntsville Symphony Orchestra Classical 5: Review

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What do Copland, Rodrigo, Smetana and Brahms have in common? Nothing, really, except a fabulous young conductor, Tobias Foscett, and the Huntsville Symphony Orchestra's fifth concert in its six-concert Classical Series at the Von Braun Center on Saturday evening.

The eclectic program (and that's putting it nicely) of music by Copland, Smetana, Rodrigo and Brahms represented a curious collection of compositions usually reserved for Pops Concert showstoppers. The unfortunate programming notwithstanding, the single brightest star of the night was Australian guest conductor, Tobias Foscett. Mr. Foscett led a determined performance of the orchestra unseen since its "Strauss Spectacular" in the season debut under hometown hero, Carlos Prieto with Huntsville darling, Susanna Phillips.

From the very first measures of Smetana's "Moldau," Foscett's energy and musicality was apparent – and so was his determination for a rich and sonorous sound from the strings which was so overwhelming and refreshing, it made the first entrance of the trumpets sound as thin, brittle, and tasteless as a communion wafer. With the exception of a particularly awkward abandonment of pitch by the double reeds, the "Moldau" was beautiful and exhilarating.

The first half of the concert closed with Copland's "Lincoln Portrait." Always a crowd favorite, "Lincoln Portrait's" oft over-dramatized narration was especially well-delivered by narrator Yvette Daniel, whose reverent reading rang with restrained poeticism. The orchestra likewise took a cautious and respectful tone which, when combined with Copland-esque transparency, came off hesitant and imprecise, especially in the opening measures. Upon the entrance of the crisp snare drum, however, the "Portrait" tightened up and progressed to a fantastic finish highlighted by a stunning trombone solo and enthusiastic cymbal playing (to say the least)!

The second half of the concert began with Rodrigo's famous "Concierto de Aranjuez" with guest artist guitarist, Manuel Barrueco. The hauntingly beautiful second movement was offset by uncomfortably labored outer movements from the orchestra which, despite its reduced size, simply could not manage the nimble precision required by the composer and displayed by the guest artist. Moreover, it's placement in the program just before a Brahms symphony, dwarfed the concerto, rendering it largely unmemorable.

What wasn't unmemorable, however, was Foscett's indelible education of Huntsville as to the beauty and craft of Brahms' "Symphony No. 3 in F Major." Foscett's patient and at times painstakingly deliberate interpretation allowed the symphony to unfold as naturally as a blooming flower – never self-indulgent and always elegant. His musicality was on display at every turn of phrase and was enabled by an orchestra invested in his vision.

With the exception of the third movement which lost its subdued waltz feel, the mature pacing of the symphony betrayed the conductor's youth. And aside from an occasionally strident clarinet solo, the

sound was well-balanced and sonorous. The fourth movement was more hopeful than joyful, due in part to Foskett's interpretation of the final "Poco Sostenuto," as an indication of tempo rather than style. The conclusion was drawn out nonetheless to a warm and powerful finale well worth the wait.

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