

Huntsville Symphony Orchestra Classical 6: Review

(April 18, 2009)

The Huntsville Symphony Orchestra's Saturday evening season-finale led by conductor Carlos Prieto exhibited potential (on paper, at least) to continue a trend in pops programming for its "Classical Series" concerts. Thankfully, two remarkable things occurred, thwarting any such criticism: a captivating viola concerto from contemporary composer Penderecki and a remarkable 'best of season' performance of Respighi's "Pines of Rome."

The concert was bookended by a tour of Italy, beginning with Rossini's "Overture to The Italian in Algiers" the musical equivalent of Italian shaved ice (tasty but hardly filling) – and was mostly unremarkable except for the stunning oboe solos by Carey Shinbaum, and exquisite piccolo playing by Morgan Williams giving the overture a cheerful and whimsical character.

The concert finished with a massive, double-installment of Respighi tone poems –the first of which, "Roman Festival" employed the crude sounds of ancient Roman life, complimented by appropriately raucous yet wonderfully technical brass playing. The concert closed with the thunderous sounds of "The Pines of Rome" – a full-out sonic assault which shook the VBC, making those oft-talked about renovations even more necessary. Weaved among the big moments, were some brilliant solo moments – specifically from clarinetist David Mitchell, as well as wonderful solos from the English Horn, off-stage trumpet, and a beautiful flute-bassoon duet.

The centerpiece of the concert and, arguably, the season, however, was Pendercki's "Concerto for Viola" performed by Roberto Diaz, former principal violist of the Philadelphia Orchestra and current President of the Curtis Institute – one of the most prestigious music schools in America. The somber first notes of the Concerto were preceded by a similarly sober, nearly apologetic introduction of the work by Mr. Prieto.

The lamenting lines of the opening viola were rich and velvety, supported by pleading strings and inventive orchestration. The soundscape of the work continued to evolve over twenty minutes from dark and brooding textures through an aleatoric agitation, wherein the viola was challenged to pierce the dense chunks of orchestration yet never buried by the stern and committed orchestra. The work resolved with a subtle optimism in the midst of a quiet, yet importunate finish.

The virtuosity of Mr. Diaz was never in question during the Concerto but was indeed confirmed in his dazzling encore performance of the last movement of Hindemith's devilishly difficult "Opus 25 Sonata." The combination of Mr. Diaz's talent and the attentive orchestra made for an important pairing in the presentation of modern music by the HSO.

Just as a mother is responsible for the diet of her child, the HSO is responsible for the symphonic diet of our community. Part of that inherit responsibility is to expose the community to modern music – that is music by living composers. The intellectual community of Huntsville should not be marginalized to a

musical diet of Beethoven and Brahms. The presence of Penderecki on Saturday evening's program was a large step forward in this vein, something the programming has lacked throughout the season.

Both last season and this season began bashfully with token endeavors to present modern music (Corigliano and Part, respectively). Yet, in both cases, the modern works were followed by large, staple repertory (Beethoven's Ninth and Strauss' Ein Heldenleben, respectively), probably in hopes that ticket buyers would forgive them for indulging in the twentieth century. The 2008 season commission of a flute concerto for long-time HSO member Evelyn Loehrlein, was impactful and beautiful, as was Saturday's presentation of Pendercki's viola concerto.

The orchestra has demonstrated its ability to execute the difficult twentieth century repertoire. Here's hoping the community will continue to support an orchestra which seeks to create history rather than to preserve history.

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