

Review: Philharmonic Orchestra's concert engaging, innovative

By LEAH HARRISON

For the Herald-Journal

Published: Sunday, January 20, 2013 at 7:27 p.m.

In case you haven't heard, the arts are in a pickle.

As various funding bodies work to stretch their dollars during financial hardship, arts organizations are unable to stay afloat by merely marking time within the boundaries of convention; to even hope for survival, they must engage innovation.

The Spartanburg Philharmonic Orchestra's Saturday evening concert serves as an example of the organization's success in the realms of newness and experimentation. Musical Director Sarah Ioannides — a champion of both contemporary composition and women in music — programmed the U.S. premiere of Andrea Tarrodi's *Lucioles* (*Fireflies*), introduced by the composer via a projected video. In her Stockholm apartment, Tarrodi explained her compositional process and read the haiku that inspired her piece: By the lily leaves/ the fireflies anchor/ the lake is illuminated.

The video was made at Ioannides's behest, and accomplished a great deal. Seeing Tarrodi's birth year in the program isn't quite the same as seeing the 31-year old in her living room, with her globe lamp and giraffe statue. Using technology to make a contemporary composer's existence tangible counts as wisdom in the arts organization culture. Furthermore, as Tarrodi talks about her piece in the video, we hear it, so when the Philharmonic performs it, familiarity is already in play. Each of these measures reels the experience of hearing a new piece closer to convention without losing the shininess of new music.

And shiny it was. At 10 minutes in length, *Lucioles* shimmered and fluttered, creating a glowing soundscape that was at once serene and lively. Through much of the piece, the strings played a variety of quick rhythmic figures, but the layered parts maintained a buoyant airiness. Principal Cellist Brenda Leonard and Concertmistress Joanna Lebo traded solos throughout, anchoring the atmospheric tinkling with more substantial melodic material. This was the Philharmonic's second Tarrodi piece; they also premiered her work in the 2011-2012 season.

Violinist Michael Ludwig joined the orchestra for Brahms's Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 77, dissolving the idea that a concert should be filled with old warhorses and just one exciting treat (Ioannides didn't program a premiere or a soloist, she programmed both). Ludwig's balance of noble, pure, full-bodied truth and bold virtuosity embodied Brahms. His integrity and reverence defined Brahms's ideals, nearly bringing the composer to stage as Ioannides did with Tarrodi. The orchestra accompanied Ludwig graciously, filling the diverse corners of placidity and brashness as called for. Ioannides's weighted timing in the third movement was especially elegant. On a third curtain call, Ludwig played an exhilarating gigue from Bach's E-major partita.

In yet another effort toward innovative programming, the Philharmonic played

Brahms's second symphony on the first half of the concert (traditionally, the symphony is relegated to the latter half). Though it was refreshing to hear the symphony first — a beautiful, pastoral work — the combination of a flipped order and two Brahms pieces on the same concert was a bit stifling. It may have worked with a Classical composer, but when your double header is a longwinded romantic, the program can feel heavy; poor Ludwig had to play to an audience that already heard nearly an hour of Brahms. To their credit, the audience greeted the soloist with exclamations of fervor and zeal.

Positioning aside, the Philharmonic performed the symphony majestically, opening tenderly and stating the first theme with great warmth and presence, as though it had occurred to them just then. The musicians offered superb solos, and in the final movement, a thrilling recapitulation concluding with brilliant trumpet calls. Innovation is necessary and applauded, but the power of 60 bows being pulled over 60 strings — the dimension of sound washing over you — is incredibly powerful in its own right.

Critic Leah Harrison is a musicologist and journalist. She can be reached at leah.e.harrison@gmail.com

Copyright © 2013 GoUpstate.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.