
El Paso Times

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6B

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Suite proves to be perfect for violinist, symphony

By Jason Sifford

John Corigliano’s score for the Francois Girard film “The Red Violin” serves two purposes.

It provides an atmospheric backdrop for an instrument’s journey through 300 years of musical and social history, and it acts as a second speaking voice for the characters in the film, telling the stories of the violinists’ relationships with the instrument and its creator.

Perhaps no violinist is better equipped to understand this aspect of Corigliano’s score than Lara St. John.

With the violin as her voice, she commands our attention, and the music we hear is the music she would have us hear. Moments of 17th-century reflection are found alongside striking bursts of 20th-century modernism, and both come to our ears convincingly interpreted.

The El Paso Symphony Orchestra met those interpretive demands brilliantly, providing a cohesive and stylistic accompaniment to the suite.

The orchestra’s playing proved the perfect match for the soloist’s musical gifts, particularly in the beautiful duets from the first-stand cellos and violins.

St. John’s virtuosity became clearly apparent in the next work on the program, her own arrangement of Franz Liszt’s “Totentanz,” originally for piano and orchestra.

Here, Liszt’s material perfectly fit the violinist’s Hungarian sensibilities, and the orchestration captured all the fire and bombast of the original. Conductor Sarah Ioannides should be credited for her intelligent accompaniment.

Too often, conductors sacrifice tone for balance, a mistake that did not plague this performance, and the overall effect quickly brought the audience to its feet.

Descriptions of the first Sibelius symphony tend to rely on geography, social commentary and the composer’s autobiography to make their point.

In concert, however, it is always the audience’s feelings that must be recognized. Maestra Ioannides understands this, and the orchestra responds.

Rather than a portrayal of the crystalline expanse of the Finnish landscape, we hear instead the color and majesty of our own mountains.

The string playing was warm and sultry, and the wind playing had a rhapsodic flexibility that, while straying at times from the precision we typically associate with Sibelius, captured a refreshing festivity and heroism.

Throughout the performance, the orchestra displayed a rare and natural sense of flexibility, and the conductor’s pacing was flawless. The result was a truly moving experience for the audience.

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