



New director Sarah Ioannides shakes concertmaster Svend Ronning's hand after the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra concert Saturday night in the Pantages.

ROSEMARY PONNEKANTI

The Pantages Theater was completely full Saturday night, and for the best of reasons — a British conductor, a Scottish percussionist and an Australian composer along with a thousand Tacomans, all gathered to immerse themselves in the depth and sheer humanity that classical instruments can produce. It was Sarah Ioannides' first concert as music director of the Tacoma Symphony, bringing with her Dame Evelyn Glennie to premiere a new percussion concerto and its composer Sean O'Boyle. And if last night's creativity and brilliance of sound is anything to go by, Ioannides' five-year term promises good things for the city.

Part of the success was a program thoughtfully chosen to back O'Boyle's neo-Romantic "Portraits of Immortal Love" with a rich Impressionist soundscape: Ravel, Debussy and Respighi. Part of it was Ioannides herself, with great attention to detail (ends of phrases, hidden melodies) and innovative staging (women's chorus singing siren songs from either side of the audience, an army of brass ranged around the balcony).

But a lot of the success was Glennie. Petite, with bubbly friendliness and bright red socks (profoundly deaf since childhood, the percussionist hears vibrations through her entire body, including feet onstage), Glennie swept through O'Boyle's concerto like a graceful whirlwind. From the circular bell melody of the opening over a shimmery string cushion, through the unbelievably fast bell part in the jig, to thundering bass drum and scarily overpowering snare in the war section, through a magical vibraphone stillness and eerie cymbal-chime effects to the galvanizing marimba cadenza, Glennie moved through the work's kaleidoscope of emotions like a dancer. Her attention to sheer sound and color seemed to pull the orchestra into a new stratum of playing, utterly

focused. And Glennie's placement across the orchestra from the percussion section allowed a lovely visual and aural antiphony in O'Boyle's well-crafted writing, giving his movie-score atmosphere more textural depth. As a major classical work, it's probably not destined for immortality, but as a showcase of percussion colors – spooky waterphone, celestial bowed crotales, inhuman shell chimes – and as an emotional tribute to the love, courage and sacrifice of those who lived through World War I, it's both brilliant and heartfelt.

Surrounding the O'Boyle was a landscape of more Impressionist color. The program opened with Ravel's "Bolero," which in Ioannides' hands turned from old chestnut to something more dignified, the dynamic transitions moving inexorably up in steps, the phrases long. Here, the TSO's principals got to shine: sassy sax and E-flat clarinet, guarded flute, and a precise, insistent snare.

After intermission, the sound suffered a little – it's a brave conductor who tries Debussy in the dry deadness of the Pantages – with some intonation problems in the first of the "Nocturnes." But the second, "Festivals," took on more energy, and the final "Sirens" paired sweet female voices over the pulsing orchestral sea.

Then came an intelligent trick from Ioannides: flowing directly on from the Debussy into Respighi's "The Pines of Rome" to create one lush, mammoth, seven-movement Impressionist symphony. Each movement built on the last – the scurrying strings and brass of the Villa Borghese, the dark red cello-bassi of the catacombs, the delicate clarinet and birdsong of the Janiculum, and finally the heroic Roman army of the Appian Way, transforming from hazy ominous quiet to triumphant brass ringing the back of the balcony and submerging the audience in the kind of sound you usually only hear from inside an orchestra.

Throughout, Ioannides spoke and conducted sincerely (including a well-attended post-concert Q&A with Glennie and O'Boyle), obviously feeling the sheer elation of the finale as much as her audience.

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