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Review: Tacoma Symphony luxuriates in Rialto sound, romantic program

HIGHLIGHTS

Debussy, Alvars and Beethoven played with warmth and emotion

Solo harpist Valerie Muzzolini Gordon impeccable rather than dramatic

Nearly-full Rialto complements second Gig Harbor performance



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If the Tacoma Symphony spends the entire 2018-19 season — when the Pantages is closed for renovation — in the Rialto Theater, it wouldn't be a bad thing at all. On Sunday afternoon, the orchestra filled the jewel-box theater with both enthusiastic audience and the kind of lush sound they can never achieve in the Pantages under current acoustic conditions. (They played the same program on Friday in Gig Harbor's Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church.)

And clearly, all the musicians were basking in both the warm resonance and the sheer pleasure of a program of Debussy, Beethoven and the melodramatic Alvars harp concerto, with an impeccable Valerie Muzzolini Gordon as soloist.

Opening with Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" was the ultimate way to explore the acoustic and usher in a sweet, pastoral mood. Mary Jensen's flute solo was rich, with a languidly slow vibrato, and matched perfectly on oboe (Selina Greso) and warm strings. Director Sarah Ioannides achieved a nice balance between contrasting tempos, giving aural space to all the small woodwind moments.

Already crowded, the stage was crammed even more to accommodate harpist Valerie Muzzolini Gordon, principal of the Seattle Symphony, who took on Elias Parish Alvars' Grand Concerto in G minor with impeccable technique, if not exactly the dramatic flair the piece clearly wanted. Called "the Liszt of the harp" as a performer, the 19th century's Alvars also composed with many Lisztian flourishes and modulations, tempered by a Gilbert-and-Sullivan tendency to melodrama. All of this was thoroughly enjoyed by the orchestra with bombastic interjections, sweet lyricisms and the like. But Gordon's playing, though clear and accurate, was more prosaic, sticking rigidly to tempo and refusing to acknowledge the piece's showoff characteristics. But pizzazz is difficult on a harp, and Gordon's rich chordal melodies, bell-like harmonics and fierce octave runs were virtuosic enough for the admiring audience.

And then came Beethoven's Symphony no. 6, the "Pastorale" — highly appropriate, with the stormy rain and sudden clear breaks in the Tacoma weather outside. From the opening strings to the oboe solo and solid, driving bass in the first movement, through the nostalgic waltz and lyrical cello solo of the second (unusually strong), to the furious storm of the fourth and the triumphant melody of the final movement, the orchestra played well, responding to Ioannides' attention to dynamic detail. Ioannides combines thoughtful musical logic (the slow-downs before new ideas, the emphasis on passed-on

motifs) with passion, encouraging both emotion and courage from her musicians. And while the acoustic didn't hide every flaw and her gestures were not always followed completely, it's clear that director, ensemble and venue made a great partnership.

The Tacoma Symphony's next concert is "Water Passion" with the Tacoma Symphony Chorus and soloists on March 20 in the Pantages Theater.

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