

Symphony Tacoma starts new concert season off with musical magic

By Dave Davison -
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Symphony Tacoma kicked off its new season with an Oct. 20 concert, "Barber and Tchaikovsky," at the Rialto Theater. (The Rialto has been functioning as a replacement venue for many of Tacoma's performance groups while the Pantages is being renovated.)

The symphony performed three works: the seven minute "Ravish and Mayhem" by contemporary composer Stephanie Berg, Samuel Barber's "Violin Concerto" and Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's "Symphony No. 5." Representing three very different eras, each of the three works seemed to have an almost programmatic power of being evocative of images, seasons and moods.

Berg's "Ravish and Mayhem," a lively composition dreamed up while the composer was on a long road trip, served as an appetizer for the evening. Berg said that she imagined a piece of music that would suggest a wild, exotic street festival in which a person would move from scene to scene, "witnessing wild dancers, street performers, and amorous couples until the elephants arrive to announce the grand finale." The piece features such exotic sounds as the violins being strummed like banjos. The final brassy bellowing of the "elephants" was majestic.

Violin virtuoso Jennifer Frautschi was brought in as the guest soloist for Barber's 1939 "Violin Concerto." Frautschi, a two-time Grammy nominee, started her violin off with a lush, throaty tone and then rapidly increased in pitch and speed. The work features musical interplay between violin and clarinet. There are beautiful passages with French horn and wonderfully deep plunges by the cellos.

At times, music from the 30s and 40s tends toward a saccharine sentimentality that makes me think of old movie soundtracks. This was sometimes the case when the full orchestra was engaged. But at other moments, such as the drive to the finale in the third movement when the solo violin is fully in the driver's seat, Barber is brilliant. Frautschi and

the orchestra got an enthusiastic standing ovation upon the completion of the performance.

The second half of the concert was the performance of Tchaikovsky's "Symphony No. 5 in E minor," which was penned in 1888. The only concrete idea that Tchaikovsky suggested about the work was that the first movement was, musically speaking, "a complete resignation before fate, which is the same as the inscrutable predestination of fate." It has thus been dubbed "the fate theme."

It starts off as having a very Russian flavor, the bassoon playing while the stings take on a respiratory, holding pattern. The whole thing builds up from there with the full power of the orchestra.

Tchaikovsky is like a wizard who seems to delight in starting from a few musical voices and building upon them until the whole orchestra is engaged in sustaining an immense musical edifice. It will then all crash into a musical plateau upon which another magnificent musical monster is summoned and placed. Time after time, Tchaikovsky will build up to moments that feel like a finale only to wipe them out and start over again. The music is always on the move, always

restless. There seems little repetition of thematic content upon which one may return for respite.

It is marvelous to behold. There are many magical vistas and fruitful moments to experience during the course of this sonic journey. There are brilliant cascades of brass, passages of fluffy pizzicato accompanied by the horns, atmospheric stings, woodwinds playing watery patterns, exotic bassoon phrases and big whirl winds of full, orchestral sound.

The closing note was followed by sustained applause and a standing ovation, as conductor and musical director Sarah Ioannides took a bow and then had individual musicians and instrumental sections stand to be acknowledged.

The concert was a great start to the new season of music by Symphony Tacoma.

Symphony Tacoma returns to the Pantages Theater Nov. 17 for "Symphonie Fantastique," by Hector Berlioz. There will also be works by Sergei Prokofiev and Emmanuel Chabrier. Pianist Henry Kramer will join the orchestra for the playing of Prokofiev's "Piano Concerto No. 2."

For more information, scheduling and tickets to Symphony Tacoma, visit www.symphonytacoma.org.