

Concert review: Symphony successfully tackles 3 divergent works

March 21, 2014 11:37 PM

By Elizabeth Bloom / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Putting a Carnegie Mellon University professor, a concert pianist and Wagner in the same sentence sounds like the beginning of an odd joke; bringing them all to Heinz Hall doesn't make for your typical concert.

Indeed, Friday night's Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra concert, led by Donald Runnicles, was among the more unusual programs of the season. It started off with a local flavor, made a pit stop with Stephen Hough's performance of Mendelssohn's First Piano Concerto and ended with orchestral highlights from Wagner's "Der Ring des Nibelungen." Music makes strange bedfellows.

The concert opened with Nancy Galbraith's "Euphonic Blues," a piece that the professor of composition wrote for the 100th anniversary of the CMU School of Music. Ms. Galbraith's piece is the last in the PSO's Year of Pittsburgh Composers; the orchestra has played works created by the local talent in four concerts this season.

Ms. Galbraith was influenced by American blues and minimalism, and her piece reminded me of John Adams' "Short Ride in a Fast Machine." But it also navigates a rich orchestration and varied tonal landscape, at once poignant then triumphant, like a dramatic movie score. Her harmonic language has a moving familiarity to it; those comforting flavors contrasting with an exotic-sounding 7/8 section in the middle. Dramatic conducting from Mr. Runnicles added zing to the piece's two major climaxes. It was an affecting performance.

Stephen Hough followed with a stellar rendition of the Mendelssohn concerto, as he matched nimble technique with colorful phrasing and, most important, a rich, gorgeous tone. In the first movement, the pianist followed an electric run with precise trills, although occasionally phrases were lost in fast, heavily pedaled moments. The second movement started with elegant cellos and violas, but Mr. Hough was not to be outdone, with a sweet timbre that melted off the piano. Even the final movement's most technical, virtuosic sections were deployed with equal attention to beauty, aided by a few effective pauses, although quick tempos created some shakiness with the orchestra. Chopin's Nocturne in E-flat Major, Op. 9, No. 2 was his encore, played like a lullaby.

The concert ended with highlights from Wagner's "Ring" cycle. Mr. Runnicles, general music director of the Deutsche Oper Berlin, is a Wagner specialist, and the performance was as tightly woven as it was dramatic.

He treated "Ride of the Valkyries" (from "Die Walkure"), "Forest Murmurs" (from "Siegfried") and "Siegfried's Rhine Journey," "Siegfried's Funeral Music," and "Brunnhilde's Immolation Scene" (from "Götterdämmerung") like five movements of an epic symphony. The familiar "Ride of the Valkyries" actually felt a bit sluggish, but the performance increased in drama over the course of the sections.

The PSO's brass section showed off its colors, especially during the "Götterdämmerung" excerpts. Principal horn William Caballero demonstrated his remarkable versatility, walking off stage for an athletic solo that immediately was followed by exposed soft playing back on stage. Those with somewhat less showy parts were no less impressive, with nuanced, expressive playing from all sections.

The concert repeats at 2:30 p.m. Sunday. Tickets: \$25.75-\$105.75; www.pittsburghsymphony.org or 412-392-4900.

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