

Vancouver Symphony concert featured stellar performances by violinist Kwak and conductor/composer Vajda

by [James Bash](#) on November 15, 2012



Sarah Kwak, the new concertmaster of the Oregon Symphony and Gregory Vajda, the former resident conductor of the Oregon Symphony, made outstanding debuts with the Vancouver Symphony on Saturday, November 10th, at Skyview High School Auditorium. Their collaboration with the Vancouver Symphony in Beethoven's Violin Concerto served as an excellent way to introduce Kwak as a featured soloist to Pacific Northwest listeners. Vajda, who is the music director

of the Huntsville Symphony Orchestra (Alabama) and the Music in the Mountains concerts (California), also led the orchestra in the US premiere in one of his own creations, entitled "Orlando's Awakening," which he completed earlier this summer, plus a performance of Zoltan Kodály's "Dances of Galánta."

Kwak delivered an uplifting performance of Beethoven's Violin Concerto, maintaining an elegant and engaging sound throughout the piece. Using the cadenzas written by Fritz Kreisler, Kwak mesmerized the audience with her ability to traverse treacherous arpeggios, double stops, and nail stratospheric notes. Her gentle landing at the end of the long cadenza in the first movement drew applause was a highlight. A problem with the hall's recording equipment unfortunately interfered with her playing for several minutes during the sublime second movement. Her graceful yet playful phrasing in the third movement was seconded by the orchestral forces, which were led solidly by Vajda.

"Orlando's Awakening" received its world premiere by the Hungarian Radio Symphony in September. Vajda based his symphonic work on Virginia Woolf's novel "Orlando," whose title character comes out of a very deep sleep to find out that he has changed from a man into a woman. Vajda introduced "Orlando's Awakening" with humor, and he got his biggest

laugh when he noted that the music in his piece was not about a sex change. He then explained that the piece deals with how artists (composers included) should not avoid telling the truth.

The piece opened with a blur of drowsy sounds from the orchestra, as if someone were deep in sleep. It was a very static, and at times, foreboding quality, and it lasted until a trio of trumpets stirred things up. But that did happen right away. The trio moved from place to place inside the hall. They played from the back of the hall, halfway down the right aisle, and in front of the first row (which is also, of course, just in front of the orchestra). The trio, led by principal trumpet Bruce Dunn, blended its sound impeccably, starting out in the lower register for the first announcement and then shifting to higher ranges as they moved toward the front of the hall.

After the third trumpet call, the orchestra became very animated before settling into dance-like music. At times, the music created a very light atmosphere in which it was easy to hear the harp and the bass violins. The piece ended in mid-stride on a high note with the sound ascending. So it gave a feeling that there were more adventures ahead for Orlando, no matter what form he/she had.

With its catchy vibe, Zoltán Kodály's "Dances of Galanta" received a lively performance from the orchestra. The piece is sort of an goulash of Gypsy tunes that Kodály heard when he spent some years growing up in the market town of Galanta, which is a market town in Northern Hungary, now Slovakia. Transitioning from one dance to the next, the orchestra captured the folky spirit of the piece and had fun with it. Perhaps the orchestra was inspired in part by Principal Clarinetist Igor Shakhmann who played his solos with panache. He was not only recognized by the conductor who is also trained as a professional clarinetist but also by his orchestral colleagues who spontaneously burst into applause when Shakhmann stood up. That was one of the coolest moments at the concert.