

Seattle mezzo comes to the rescue in Vancouver Symphony's season finale

by James Bash on May 27, 2013



With a score in hand and her husband at the wheel, mezzo soprano Kathryn Weld rescued the Vancouver Symphony (WA) concerts this weekend, traveling from Seattle to replace an ill Christine Meadows in the orchestra's performances of Prokofiev's "Alexander Nevsky." The concert was the final one of the season, and it also featured the young, talented winners of the orchestra's annual competition for young artists. But it was Weld's soulful solo that counterbalanced so well against the stirring choral and orchestral

sections that made concert a memorable triumph.

One of the terrific things about Vancouver Symphony is its young artist competition, which rewards the winners with a substantial monetary gift and gives them a chance to perform with the orchestra in a regular concert. Isabel Skau, a 16-year-old student at David Douglas High School, played the first movement of Louis Spohr's Clarinet Concerto. Skau created beautiful, flowing lines in the many runs that seemed to detour all over the place in Spohr's piece. Next came Megan Yip, a 16-year-old junior at Jesuit High School, who really got into Tchaikovsky's "Variations on a Rococo Theme." From the first note, she established an evocative tone and explored the heights and depths of this work with élan. Pianist Andrew Yoon, a 17-year-old junior at Westview High School, excelled with balance and a polished sound during his performance of Mendelssohn's "Capriccio Brilliant." With agile technique, he made the fastest passages look free and easy, and the piece was a pure delight to hear from start to finish.

The second half of the program was dedicated to “Alexander Nevsky,” one of the great cantatas of the Twentieth Century. Prokofiev wrote it as music for a Soviet propaganda film but later revised it for concert performances. It tells the story of the great 13th Century military hero, Alexander Nevsky, who defended Russia from an invasion by the Teutonic (German) Knights. Stalin thought that the film would help to inspire his countrymen against a possible invasion by Germany at the beginning of WWII.

The Oregon Repertory Singers applied extra gusto when singing the many loud sections of this piece. With the orchestra, conducted by Salvador Brotons, the 80 voices of the choir created the menacing atmosphere of the Teutonic soldiers as well as the heroic sounds of the Russian folk and its leader Alexander Nevsky. The clash during the “Battle on the Ice” segment had a visceral quality that leveled the playing field for Weld, who then sang the song of lament of a young woman who surveys the destruction of the battler. The last section of the piece was wonderfully majestic and dissonant as the victors marched triumphantly into the town of Pskov.

Weld earned kudos for singing her solo with conviction and beautiful phrasing, including those that descended into the lowest alto register. The choir also contributed outstandingly and didn't give an inch at the end when volume was everything. The brass section of the orchestra also deserved special phrase, especially the trumpets, led by principal Bruce Dunn, who executed numerous treacherous runs.

The concert began with a rousing rendition of “Hoedown” from Aaron Copland's “Rodeo,” which got the most votes from the audience earlier in the year. Before the concert began, it was announced that the orchestra's new chamber music series will hold some of its concerts at Kiggins Theatre in downtown Vancouver. The orchestra also promoted next season's guest soloists: pianists Orli Shaham and Igal Kesselman, violinist Ryu Goto, soprano Anna Kasakova, harmonica virtuoso Joe Powers, tuba virtuoso JÁTtik Clark, and guest conductor Jesus Medina. It will also be Brotons's 23rd season with the orchestra as its music director.