

Super Sibelius from Akiyama

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Music, Musically Speaking host Harry Adaskin is fond of saying, offers us access to a metaphysical world — a non-verbal paradise, if you will. Finding the doorway in some compositions is like opening a Chinese puzzle box; in others the threshold just begs to be tripped over.

If some could not find the door for their preconceptions in Lothar Klein's Symphonic Etude, they could not have asked for two more come-hither pieces than the Grieg Piano Concerto and the Sibelius Symphony No. 2 on the program for the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's second Musically Speaking concert.

Especially the Sibelius as it was played Sunday evening by the VSO under the direction of Kazuyoshi Akiyama. We heard the kind of expressive, finished playing that has often been promised by the orchestra in recent seasons — but seldom delivered with this amount of commitment and certainty. There was a rare richness and warmth to the sound produced by the strings and a matching brightness and color to the brass. And the orchestra as a whole responded to what seemed at times to be inspired direction by Akiyama with a thrilling subtlety of understanding and sympathy.

Once criticized as "vulgar, self-indulgent and provincial beyond description", the symphony, admittedly, is not the most subtle of expressions. He might exaggerate a little or slip into sentimentality and, certainly he does not always say what he wants in the most elegant manner, but there is an honesty, an integrity in Sibelius' voice. When this voice is appreciated for itself and allowed to speak, the experience becomes genuinely touching; and when this happens the work transcends its own limitations as a piece of composition — particularly if it's performed this well.

Akiyama's performance showed for the first time in a long time his very real depths: the work seemed important to him, and that communicated strongly. The opening of the second movement shimmered with the quality of drifting mist and then grew in freely swinging, broad swells — like the arcs cut by a great pendulum that has a fixed centre, a point of complete control, yet moves with a powerful downward and upward rush. And in the third movement, the same sense of energy as the lyrical melody finally forces its way into fullness like the leaves of spring bursting from their buds.

Certainly, it was the highlight of Sunday's concert. And while the VSO has a largely pre-programmed season, it would be worth considering transferring the piece into the main series — played in this manner, it deserves that type of exposure.

As to the remainder of the concert: guest pianist Philippe Entremont unfortunately fell foul of an old performing superstition. In his introduction, Adaskin praised Entremont to the skies when he should have been telling him to break a leg.

We did not need to be told that Entremont is a superb artist — the man has earned the very real respect of Vancouver audiences time and again with his elegant yet incisive style and his subtle interpretations. And one off-night is not enough to change that.

Although he turned in a less than perfect performance technically of the Grieg concerto, Entremont did not lose contact with the soul of the piece. The work did not transport us as the Sibelius but there were moments that pleased: the folk melody of the adagio echoed with a haunting quality and there was a nicely physical lyrical lilt to the dance tunes of the closing movement.

For many, the problem work of the evening was not the Grieg but the Klein, a contemporary work by this German-born, Canadian-based educator and composer. It is not accessible writing in the sense that the Sibelius and Grieg are accessible. It does not wear its heart on its sleeve to make its statement — but it communicates just as surely.

Scored for wind orchestra with piano, percussion and harp, the work employs fragmented phrases and ideas. They appear in complex juxtapositions and layerings, sometimes borne on whirlpools and spirals, sometimes on waves or small eddies — the whole further fragmented through changing tensions. The thick choral structures of piano and bassoons, dry and terse woodwinds and metallic harp, a percussive driving sheet of sound cut through and exploded with heavy-textured brass. Beyond anything else, there are delights of color, texture and rhythm — beautiful in and of themselves.

The emotional outpourings of early Scandinavia set beside a contemporary expression of Canada? Not at all treat and trick — rather, a cunningly contrasted and finely balanced offering of three very valid expressions.

Jane Sun
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