

**Review****A Mixed Scottish Bag from the  
Canton Symphony Orchestra (October 5)**

by Tom Wachunas



What more appropriate way to begin a Scottish-themed program than with a live pipe and drum band? Members of the Celtic Eagle Pipe Band joined the Canton Symphony Orchestra (CSO) in opening its 2013-2014 season with *Marches and Airs*, written by local composer and Music Director of the Tuscarawas Philharmonic, Eric Benjamin.

In his program notes, Benjamin made no secret of his love for the sound of bagpipes. Addressing the task of effectively blending the orchestra with the sequence of six traditional Scottish tunes that comprise the work, he wrote, “As the music exists for pipes and drums alone, the challenge for me as an arranger was to come up with interesting things for the orchestra to do so as to contribute something unique to the sequence.”

Not least among the challenges was to allow the orchestral instruments to be heard against a loud group of three pipers and two drummers. When the piece began, with distant, dream-like tones from the bagpipes emanating from the rear of the auditorium, there was every indication that a pleasing aural blend was achievable as the orchestra echoed the haunting effect from the stage.

The performance waxed problematic, however, when the band marched to the very front of the house to play the remainder of the piece. Here, the famous (or infamous?) Scottish two-tone pipe wail became an obstacle to hearing the orchestra. To be fair, there were some audible enough passages wherein the orchestra delivered genuinely stirring and lush melodic transitions between pipe tunes. But such moments were short-lived respites from the seemingly incessant off-pitch piercings of the bagpipes. Notably absent from the overall sound was a counter-balance that might have been accomplished with elevated sonority from the bass instruments. Yet for all of that, the performance exuded a type of frenetic heroism, prompting a portion of the audience to a standing ovation.

Violinist William Preucil, concertmaster of The Cleveland Orchestra, was the guest soloist for the second work on the program, Max Bruch’s *Scottish Fantasy*. If wizardly technique were the sole measure of perfect playing, this performance would indeed qualify as a flawless gem. Through all four movements, the work calls for commanding virtu-

osity from the soloist in articulating flurries of arpeggios, sustained trills and crisp double-stoppings. Preucil met that requirement with astonishing precision and fluidity.



Largely missing, though, was the emotional resonance of the folk melodies which inspired the composer. The prevailing spirit here seemed more intellectual than lyrical. As the sonic temperature of Preucil's playing remained somewhat tepid throughout, Maestro Gerhardt Zimmermann kept the orchestra at a similarly understated level, no doubt to stay balanced with both Preucil's soft touch and the important, lovely accompanying solo work from CSO principal harpist Nancy Patterson. As it was, the performance elicited another standing ovation.

So too the evening's final work, Mendelssohn's magnificent Symphony No. 3, the "Scottish." Only this time, the reaction from the audience seemed more unanimous and palpably electric, surely because the orchestra had shed all traces of the overly-finessed restraint so apparent in the previous work.

Mendelssohn's compelling and evocative musicality, especially in the drama of the third movement and vivacious majesty of the finale, provided solid ground from which the orchestra could truly soar. With impeccable artistry, the CSO demonstrated the full range of its technical and expressive capabilities. And nowhere in this remarkable body of musicians are those elements more evident than in the powerful, refined sonority of the string section. *This* was the orchestra we came to hear.

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