

Inspiring Mendelssohn, Transcendent Strauss from the Canton Symphony Orchestra (Jan. 23)

by Tom Wachunas



Among the many combined ingredients that make the Canton Symphony Orchestra the excellent ensemble that it is, arguably none is more vital than the relationship between the conductor, Gerhardt Zimmermann, and his orchestra musicians. In the past, I have often regarded Zimmermann's readings of a given work as impassioned embodiments of his uncanny ability to draw out a particularly radiant sonority from his players. Call it the pursuit of unified intent, a one-for-all and all-for-one process.

Whatever else you choose to call it (spiritual alchemy, or outright magic comes to mind), this ability to morph musical notations on paper into a very real, emotional experience of illumination for the listener was in especially fine form on January 23. Light can surely have a sound, and here it was glowing yet again at Umstattd Performing Arts Hall.

The evening commenced with Felix Mendelssohn's *Symphony No. 5*, the "Reformation Symphony." My sense is that this symphony remains relatively under-appreciated when compared to the composer's more "mature" works such as No. 4, the "Italian," or No. 3, the "Scottish" (the numerical assignment of No. 5 is chronologically misleading due to publication dates). Critics of the day considered it too programmatic and melodically unsatisfying, and Mendelssohn himself seemed scornful when he commented, "I sometimes wonder that I did not make a better job of it."

But the CSO breathed an invigorating new energy into the work, treating it with a palpable, deserved reverence for its stirring ethereality. Threaded through the entire performance was an astonishing, detailed attention to the layers of tonality unfolding in the strings as they navigated dramatic shifts in color and texture. Melodically unsatisfying? Hardly. By the time the entire wind section and lower strings were proudly singing Martin Luther's majestic hymn, *Ein feste Burg* ("A Mighty Fortress") in the

triumphal fourth movement, I felt immersed in something wholly — indeed holy — sublime.

After intermission, the program literally shifted into overdrive with John Adams' *Short Drive in a Fast Machine*. Here, the orchestra's exhilarating articulation of wildly diverse tones and textures was propelled by the steady quarter-note tapping of the woodblock. Like an incessant piston, it drove the music's polyrhythmic exclamations, pulsing with wickedly accelerating excitement through winds, strings and brass.

Enhancing the sonic exuberance of the orchestra was the accompanying presentation of *The Earth – An HD Odyssey*, featuring stunning, high-definition videos and images of Earth, compiled from NASA's shuttle missions, the International Space Station, and orbiting satellites, and projected on a large screen behind and above the orchestra. This visual component, commissioned in 2012 by the Houston Symphony, is the sequel to *The Planets – an HD Odyssey*, which the CSO performed to considerable acclaim in 2014, and was developed in collaboration with the celebrated documentary filmmaker, Duncan Copp.

The meticulous synchronicity of spectacular visuals with the music had a particularly mesmerizing effect during the evening's final selection, Richard Strauss's epic tone poem, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* ("Thus Spoke Zarathustra"). Strauss named his work after the monumental 1895 prose poem by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who found inspiration in the mystical teachings of the ancient Persian religious leader, Zoroaster. Of course many are familiar with the dramatic, brassy opening of Strauss's piece, thanks to the 1968 classic sci-fi film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, though perhaps less so with its episodic interpretation of Nietzsche's vision for the evolution of a godless *Übermensch* (Superman).

I don't recall an occasion when the CSO was more powerful or finessed in balancing the challenging intricacies of conflicting tonalities and mood changes that characterize this complicated work, from brooding drama to gentler lyricism. And the same attention to aural detail that was evident in the Mendelssohn was even more pronounced here.

So much so that something quite ironic emerged from all the *Sturm und Drang*. This performance of Richard Strauss's music was hypnotic and compelling to the point of transcending its contextual origins. Never mind Nietzsche's blustery atheism and convoluted philosophizing. In the end, what resonated most was not what Strauss called "...homage to Nietzsche's genius," but rather something profoundly divine. The wondrous sound of the CSO can do that.

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