

Review

A ravishing anniversary performance from the Canton Symphony (February 16)

by Tom Wachunas



On February 16, 1938, the newly formed Canton Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Richard W. Oppenheim, gave its first-ever concert at the Canton City Auditorium before a sold-out crowd of 3,300 listeners. Seventy-five years to the day after that rousing debut, the CSO re-created the same program in Umstattd Hall with a clearly impassioned Maestro Gerhardt Zimmermann at the podium, conducting an equally inspired orchestra.

The program consisted of Beethoven's *Egmont Overture*, Haydn's "Surprise" Symphony No. 94, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, and Tchaikovsky's *Marche Slave*. So while this was a concert of very familiar works which have endured as international audience favorites, there was nothing "old hat" or phlegmatic about Zimmermann's reading of the material. As always, he effectively ignited this orchestra's riveting unity of purpose and youthful capacity for investing the familiar with startlingly fresh aural fire. What was old became new again, wholly meriting repeated jubilant ovations from an enthralled audience.

Much of the CSO's signature charisma is rooted in the astonishing string section, which on this occasion was as warmly sonorous, technically impeccable and powerfully emotive as I've ever heard, beginning with the Beethoven. It is no small feat to make the dramatic tensions and spirit of triumphal heroism of *Egmont* a palpable, heartfelt reality. And that is precisely what the orchestra achieved here with an edge-of-your-seat intensity.

Though certainly less stormy in nature (and indeed lightweight by comparison), Haydn's Symphony No. 94 is nonetheless sweetly engaging in its overall lyricism and vigorous effervescence – qualities which the orchestra rendered with jaunty confidence. As for the so-called surprises in the work, I think that (excepting for those listeners who may have never before encountered the piece) the sudden fortissimo chord with accompanying drum whack in the lilting second movement, and the unexpectedly loud timpani roll in the spritely final movement, still retain their appeal in much the same way a classic joke does. You know the punch line and when it's coming, yet it brings a smile every time.

For the second half of the evening, *everything* that makes this musical body a true cultural treasure was in glorious form. From the precisely balanced aural dynamics of all sections working together and depth of color and texture, to the many flawless passages from soloists, the entire orchestra brought breathtaking thrust to the complex musicality of the exotic *Scheherazade* and the relentless, thundering panache of *Marche Slave*.

Throughout *Scheherazade*, Concertmaster Lauren Roth poured an unforgettable and otherwise larger-than-life dimensionality into her soaring violin cadenzas. The intense sensuality of her bowing brought to mind a sorceress wielding her magic wand to entrance us with intriguing tales of love and adventure. Her playing often exuded a mournful urgency, at times beautifully echoed in the solo passages from principal cellist Erica Snowden. Roth's inspiring virtuosity is a vital asset to this orchestra, already rich with unassailable artistry.

According to a recent article in *The Repository*, Canton's daily newspaper, at one point during the original 1938 concert, the vice-chairman of the Canton Symphony Association said to the audience, "We have sown musical seeds in Canton. Now it is up to us to keep the soil fertile and cultivated." Seventy-five years later, it is eminently clear that Canton has reaped a sumptuous, bountiful harvest.

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