

Review

Canton Symphony Orchestra: a marriage of passion and perplexity (March 23)

by Tom Wachunas



If there is a single idea that remains maddeningly entangled with my overall sense of the March 23 program by the Canton Symphony Orchestra, it is that love is a many splintered thing. For it was largely a theme of love, in wildly diverse applications, that united the three works on the program: Beethoven's *Leonore Overture No. 3*, *Canti guerrieri ed amorosi (Songs of War and Love)* by American composer Claude Baker, and *Symphony No. 5* by Dmitri Shostakovich. The evening was a stormy orchestral journey, some of it difficult to navigate, but ultimately richly rewarding.

Not surprisingly, the performance of the Beethoven overture was utterly entrancing. With inspiring clarity, the orchestra wholly embraced the work's intense pathos and urgent drama of undeserved suffering and the resolute power of heroic love.

The second selection of the evening was the much touted world premiere of Claude Baker's *Canti guerrieri ed amorosi*, which was commissioned through Meet the Composer's *Commissioning Music/USA program*, and written specifically to commemorate the CSO's 75th Anniversary. Knowing this in advance of the performance, I thought it reasonable to expect an emotionally compelling encounter befitting the occasion. I anticipated a joyful, accessible work that would showcase all the sublime lyrical depth, astonishing technical virtuosity and sonorous aural range of this great orchestra.

So much for lofty expectations. I do realize that 'joy' and 'accessibility' are subjective elements which can be, relative to a listener's experience, completely absent from many contemporary orchestral pieces. And so it is that I found this particular piece to be an arduous conceptual exercise in sonic abstraction of a highly disaffecting sort. In this twenty minute-long, three movement excursion into labyrinthine polyrhythms, dissonance and relentlessly overlapping percussive textures, melody had left the building.

To be fair, Baker's extensive program notes effectively illuminated the work's intellectual thrust. Perhaps a fuller appreciation of its structural and aural complexities depends upon the extent of our familiarity with the medieval and Renaissance vocal compositions

(about love and war) that inspired them. Even so, Baker states that he focused his energies on a more visceral presentation of the poetic essence of his source texts as opposed to rendering literal transcriptions of musical content. Consequently, melodic references to the Monteverdi madrigal, or the onomatopoetic song by Clement Janequin, for example, were admittedly minimal if discernible at all.

While this was surely a challenging work for the audience, it was all the more so for the orchestra. Every section played with an eerily robotic if not riveting concentration and precision as they coaxed bizarre sound effects from their instruments. In the end, judging from the lukewarm audience reception, this sort of musical severity was far too subtle and perplexing to elicit anything like real affection for the material. Love can indeed be a battlefield.

We surely live in an era of cultural tolerance (albeit begrudging at times) for even the most alienating musical experiences, but such was not the case for Dmitri Shostakovich in 1936 Moscow. He was severely denounced and blacklisted by Joseph Stalin for his music that didn't meet government "standards." Shostakovich called his *Symphony No. 5*, the final work on this program, "...a Soviet artist's practical, creative reply to just criticism." The composer's explanation of the work being about "joy of living" was just vague enough to regain his good standing, even though the work is now largely regarded not as an abject apology, but as a bittersweet and ironic skewering of pompous Socialist expectations.

While there is a sense of Shostakovich's deep love for his homeland threaded through this symphony, I think of its inclusion here, replete as it is with tumultuous emotionality, as a brilliant vehicle for Maestro Gerhardt Zimmermann to communicate his and the orchestra's palpable love for the music itself. This is certainly not to presume that the CSO was in any way unsupportive of, or unenthused by, the previous work's challenges, but simply to place afresh the Shostakovich work in the context of a "practical, creative reply." And what a bedazzling reply it was! Here was the orchestra at its electrifying best, totally immersed in and committed to soaring expressivity. Even Zimmermann's demeanor at the podium was especially animated, his every impassioned gesture seeming to inject his musicians with inexhaustible vigor and finesse.

As the roar of approval from the audience would testify, musical matters of the heart such as this one will trump cerebral experiments every time.

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