

**Review****Soaring Wagner, Savage Stravinsky from the Canton Symphony (April 20)**

by Tom Wachunas



The Canton Symphony Orchestra enlisted Thomson Smillie, the acclaimed opera producer, stage director and lecturer, as guest speaker for its April 20 season finale concert at Umstattdt Hall. His observations before and during the first half of the program, consisting of three selections from Wagner operas, were delightfully astute and witty, and it's difficult to imagine a more excited champion of Wagner's impactful genius.

In retrospect, Smillie's directive to the audience on how to best embrace the first work of the evening, *Prelude and Liebestod* from *Tristan und Isolde*, and the third selection, Brünnhilde's Immolation scene from *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*), seems somewhat curious if not counterintuitive. Smillie posited that the dramatic thrust of these works cannot be wholly appreciated via the inadequate (and perhaps even silly) words in the libretto, but rather through the cascading orchestral surges he compared to musical orgasms. While we hear the singer with our ears and see her with our eyes, he explained further, we must listen to the orchestra with our hearts to experience what words on their own could never impart.

Here, however, any libretto shortcomings in communicating the emotional scope of Wagner's grief-stricken heroines were utterly erased by the breathtaking performances of guest soprano and Canton native Amy Yekel. Yes, the orchestra was as magnificent as ever in delivering Wagner's many polyphonic marvels (including the iconic, thunderous second work on the program, *Ride of the Valkyries*) under the inspiring baton of Gerhardt Zimmermann. But Yekel's partnership in performing two of Wagner's most searing visions of love consummated through death was a phenomenon in itself.

With sustained muscularity and tonal sensuality, her singing was a thrilling embodiment of all the agony and ecstasy that engulfs the characters of both Isolde cradling the lifeless body of Tristan, and Brünnhilde leaping with steely resolve on to Siegfried's funeral pyre. Even as I could see the text translation projected high above the stage, I was more transfixed by "reading" the story on Yekel's intensely expressive face. The powerful, warm sonority of her voice (with no microphone amplification) was of world-class quality and an equal match to the towering drama emanating from the noticeably augmented orchestra (which included four Wagner tubas).

The evening's final selection was Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre Du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*). One-hundred years after its riot-inciting Paris premiere in 1913, the work remains a bedeviling concoction that can still elicit fear and loathing from lovers of more traditional orchestral music. For in this seminal work of 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernism, harmony and melody all but disappear into an eerie melange of dissonant instrumental textures and quickly changing, throbbing rhythmic themes wherein the percussion section reigns supreme.

That said, the orchestra navigated the work, appropriately enough, with a kind of preternatural intensity, as if caught up in a shamanistic conjuring of primal spirits. The performance was a robust reminder of the panache and spirit of daring that makes this orchestra so mesmerizing in its own right.

*Published on clevelandclassical.com April 23, 2013*