

## Review

**Canton Symphony Orchestra: Making Ives Palatable, Grieg Rhapsodic, Elgar Triumphant (November 24)**

by Tom Wachunas



The November 24 Canton Symphony Orchestra (CSO) Masterworks series concert at Umstattdt Performing Arts Hall was billed as “Friends and Family.” While that designation was largely relevant to the second-half performance of Elgar’s *Enigma Variations* – 14 short musical portraits of the composer’s friends – it was also no doubt a nod to the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday, traditionally a time of lavish family gatherings. Hence, the evening began with Charles Ives’ *Thanksgiving and Forefathers’ Day*, the final movement of his 1913 *Holidays Symphony* (alternately called *A New England Holiday Symphony*).

This work could hardly be called a warm, festive mood-setter. In fact, it’s downright listener-unfriendly unless you’ve acquired some appreciation of Ives’ aesthetic explorations in polytonality, polyrhythms and other departures from traditional symphonic form. Toward that end, Maestro Gerhardt Zimmermann prefaced his unusually lengthy introduction of the work by saying that he considered Charles Ives to be “...the most authentic American composers there is.” He then proceeded to regale the audience with an astute, often humorous analysis, leading the orchestra through exemplary snippets to illustrate his points. Call it an invitation for listeners to identify a path through the piece’s aural challenges. It is indeed a daunting collision of fragmented traditional church and Thanksgiving hymns, often simultaneously rendered in conflicting keys and meters.

The orchestra was consistently crisp, fervent and otherwise true to Ives’ celebration of cacophonous Americana. And thankfully, in the middle section there emerges a surprisingly elegant (and by Ivesian standards, conservative) passage that suggests a graceful albeit tenuous procession into clear light. An added surprise was the previously unpublished contribution of Canton Symphony Chorus members, present in the audience, who stood to sing a charming hymn fragment in counterpoint to the orchestra. Ultimately it was a moment that resonated into the final moments of the work, imbuing it with more tenderness than tension.

What followed surely must rank as one of, if not *the* most enthralling performances by a CSO guest soloist in recent years. Pianist Alexander Schimpf, whose increasing rise to international acclaim includes winning First Prize at the 2011 Cleveland International Piano Competition, didn't merely play with, but rather seemed to breathe in unison with the CSO. In an inspired exposition of Grieg's magnificent *Piano Concerto in a minor*, orchestra and piano were equal partners in a compelling conversation, matching each other perfectly in tonal resonance and emotive power.

There was neither superfluous bravado nor frivolous ornamentation in Schimpf's playing, whether in his utterly breathtaking cadenza at the end of the first movement or in the mellifluous, dream-like second movement. Instead, he invested every note, chord or arpeggio with a sincerity of dramatic purpose and authentic poeticism, all the way through the rhapsodic theme developments of the majestic finale.

In his encore performance of Grieg's *Notturmo (Nocturne)*, from Opus 54 of *Lyric Pieces*, Schimpf further mesmerized the adoring audience with his lyrical touch and insightful phrasings. The sheer magic imparted by this pianist left me wondering if, after intermission, Elgar's *Enigma Variations* would feel somewhat anticlimactic.

In retrospect, it was a foolish concern. This is after all the Canton Symphony Orchestra. And Elgar's score is an electrifying mix of orchestral textures, tempi and moods, all of which delivered here with infectious vigor. I think it only right to say the CSO yet again surpassed its own standards of excellence.

*Photo of Alexander Schimpf with The Cleveland Orchestra at the finals of the 2011 Cleveland International Piano Competition by Roger Mastroianni.*

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