

Review

**Canton Symphony Casual Series opens
with Bass-ic Virtuosity (January 9)**

by Tom Wachunas



Among the more delightful inventions of human creativity is the string section of an orchestra. Think of it as the aural equivalent of a painter's palette laid out with a full spectrum of pigments. Just as certain hues (singly or in combination) can conjure certain subjective responses from viewers, so too the timbres of particular stringed instruments are well-suited to elicit specific emotional states or images in the listener.

I tell you this in a spirit of surprise at the opening concert of this season's Canton Symphony Orchestra (CSO) *Casual Series*. These are informal, recital-style performances in Cable Recital Hall, spotlighting members of the CSO. The January 9 concert featured CSO Principal Bassist Cory Palmer along with guest pianist Katherine Monsour Barley. The eclectic program included the Baroque era *Sonata in g minor* by Henry Eccles; four short, early 20th century pieces by Serge Koussevitzky; four more short works for solo bass by contemporary composer Dave Anderson; and *Elegy* and *Tarantella* by Giovanni Bottesini, often remembered as "the Paganini of the double bass."

Throughout the proceedings, the accompaniments by pianist Katherine Monsour Barley (a founding teacher at Pittsburgh Music Academy where she has taught since its beginnings in 1996) were lovely, articulate and acoustically well-balanced with Palmer's bass work.

The particular program selections are not largely memorable as especially powerful works of music. On the other hand, they are in varying degrees compelling platforms for technical prowess on the part of the bassist, and Palmer rose to the occasion with admirable virtuosity.

And herein was the aforementioned element of surprise. After all, it seems counterintuitive to coax truly high notes (such as we reasonably expect from the violin or viola) from an instrument designed for delivering very low, rumbling sonority. But this program was amply endowed with demands to do just that. Palmer was wholly riveting as he employed a formidable arsenal of dexterous slides and crisp arpeggiations that took him into seemingly impossible high registers.

Granted, there were occasional passages in those upper ranges when true pitch floundered momentarily. But such flaws never obscured the overall sensibility of the sustained mood, whether slow and mournful, sweetly plaintive, or spritely and joyous.

I admit to finding something somewhat funny about the whole idea of this kind of animated music performed on the heavy, lumbering bass, even in its most solemn progressions. There were moments throughout the performance, after Palmer had finessed an intricate foray into ringing high tones, when I detected the glimmer of a smile on his face. Maybe he sensed the humor, too. As this concert reminded me, what could be more poignant or stirring than to imagine the walrus successfully aspiring to birdsong?

Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 14, 2014