

A Contemplative and Sardonic War Remembrance from Canton Symphony Orchestra (November 23)

by Tom Wachunas



If America's entry into World War II was seen by its citizens as not only necessary but also heroic and noble, then perhaps no orchestral work better embraced such lofty resolve than Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man*. Thus began the program called "Remembrance" by the Canton Symphony Orchestra, with CSO assistant conductor Rachel L. Waddell on the podium, on November 23 at Umstattd Performing Arts Hall.

In 1942, Copland composed his brief but iconic fanfare to boost national morale. Even now the work remains a dramatic call to attention. Beginning with an explosive BANG from the percussion that resonated in the hall like a

deafening thunderclap, and through a succession of martial soarings in the brass, I can't recall a more powerful rendering of the work than what the orchestra delivered here.

Copland's *Quiet City*, the second work on the program, was drawn from the incidental music he wrote for a drama of the same name by Irwin Shaw in 1939. Though war as such was not a pretext for the music, Copland intended his concert suite to communicate the nostalgia and angst of a society deeply conscious of its insecurities. Rhapsodic solos for trumpet and English horn, exquisitely performed here by Scott Johnston and Cynthia Warren, respectively, evoked sensations of gauzy stillness, mystery, and nervousness. Broadly spaced atmospheric passages from the sonorous strings built slowly to a climax before coming to a hushed, solemn end.

The intensely pensive ambience of this work, as well as the first movement of Copland's Symphony No. 3, which followed, was made all the more gripping by large-screen synchronized projections of black and white photographs from World Wars I and II

fading in and out above the orchestra. A collaboration with Westwater Arts Photochoreography, the haunting photomontages were masterfully constructed by Nicholas Bardonnay.

These arresting panoramas of war's searing devastation were not present during the following piece, *Elegy for Strings and Harp: In Memoriam Rupert Brooke*. Still, the wartime spectre of human sorrow resonated strongly in this short work from 1915 by Australian composer Frederick Septimus Kelly. Serving in the Royal Navy Division during a Mediterranean campaign in World War I, the 24 year-old Kelly composed the tone poem on the occasion of the death of his close friend and shipmate, British poet Rupert Brooke.

Though it is Kelly's best-known work (from an admittedly slim oeuvre), it is very rarely performed. That's more than a little surprising, considering the profoundly moving, lyrical character of the music. The compositional dynamic is episodic, comprised of a series of gentle, hymn-like crescendos in the strings and lovely, shimmering accents from the harp, all conjuring images of a slow funeral procession against a backdrop of ocean swells, or sunlight dappling the wind-rippled leaves of the olive trees that hover over the poet's island grave.

Without the magnetic effects of projected photographs, there was time to be visually drawn to the conductor's animated demeanor. Rachel Waddell was palpably caught up in the emotional scope of Kelly's music, as if pouring herself into the orchestra, which responded with an outpouring of equal passion.

With the program's finale, the tenor of the evening shifted away from the mournful gravitas of the preceding works into a distinctly more rambunctious realm. When Dmitri Shostakovich premiered his Symphony No. 9 in Leningrad in 1945, Russian audiences, and Stalin in particular, were expecting a transcendent victory fanfare, a paean to Soviet greatness in the spirit of Beethoven's ninth. Instead, the composer offered an irreverent, startlingly compact orchestral essay threaded through with a sardonic spirit. Stalin, Shostakovich's nemesis, and many other Russians of that day felt insulted and otherwise mortified.

Waddell took a somewhat hefty amount of time introducing the work, enthusiastically embracing it as a teaching moment. She led the orchestra through several passages of repetitious, inane triads and arpeggios to demonstrate the composer's insouciant disregard for heroic or pompous theme development.

The intent of including the work in this context was certainly not to dismiss or diminish our appreciation of war's terrible toll, or our memory of those who served. It was, as Waddell explained, simply to lighten our mood a bit and hopefully raise a collective

smile by providing some emotional relief. Including brilliant solo passages from the brass, piccolo and bassoon, the entire ensemble crackled as it was clearly victorious in accomplishing just that.

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