

CityMusic Cleveland at Lakewood Congregational Church (March 13)

by Daniel Hathaway



If Friday evening's CityMusic Cleveland concert ended up being a bit topsy-turvy, it was for a good reason. The order of events in the printed program began with Edvard Grieg's first *Peer Gynt* suite and ended with Arvo Pärt's *Symphony No. 4*, with Carl Nielsen's violin concerto in the middle. In actuality, the first and last pieces were flipped, making for a much more effective sequence.

Guest conductor Joaquin Valdepeñas, long-time principal clarinet of the Toronto Symphony, stepped in for CityMusic's current four-concert set in place of music director Avner Dorman, no reason given. Conducting bare-handed, he led a sensitive reading of Pärt's mystical, meditative symphony, subtitled "Los Angeles" after a prayer to a guardian angel the composer was using in a choral work, an after the name of the

orchestra that commissioned it.

Scored for strings, percussion and harp, the work probably achieves its greatest impact with a string section of symphonic dimensions, but even with smaller string forces, it drew the listener into Pärt's special musical world and held one's attention for most of its 30-minute duration. It wouldn't have made a good concert closer.

Beginning ritualistically with the tinkling of bells, the three-movement symphony unfolds gradually with meaningful pauses in the first movement (*Con Sublimata*). A different, more anguished feeling permeates the second movement (*Affannoso*), perhaps a reflection of Pärt's dedication of the symphony to "all those imprisoned without rights in Russia." After an inexorable march, the third movement (*Deciso*) ends in a rising figure and whispers for high strings, harp and percussion.

At the center of Friday evening's program, violin soloist Adele Anthony was in full control of Nielsen's concerto, playing with strength, confidence and easy virtuosity. Nielsen noted that his concerto "must have substance and be popular and showy without being superficial," and Anthony hewed closely to those specifications, contributing two hefty and athletic cadenzas as well as drawing out Nielsen's lyrical lines with tender sensitivity.

Valdepeñas seemed somewhat ill-at-ease during the Nielsen, perhaps because he now had to deal with a wind section elevated on the chancel platform, which restricted his movements to shoulder-high and above. His gestures became loopy and undefined, and the orchestra's ensemble sometimes grew ragged as a result.

The four selections from his incidental music to Ibsen's play that Grieg extracted to make up his *Peer Gynt Suite No. 1* make a tight and effective grouping. Valdepeñas and CityMusic put them across stylishly, ending with a frenzied *accelerando* in honor of the Mountain King.

This was the second of four performances of this program around the region. While it's difficult to adjust to a different venue every day, there are a few details of concert production that could be tightened up for any occasion. Friday's performance began several minutes late and was further delayed by remarks from the host pastor and CityMusic's president — who gave his own take on the Pärt work and had the percussion section demonstrate common instruments that probably most people would recognize. The departure from the printed program left the audience guessing about when intermission was to start. And though the cookies provided by the church were tasty, the interval went on too long.

On the plus side, Donald Rosenberg's program notes were chatty and informative, and wore their erudition lightly. He should be invited to do this more often.

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