

Canton Symphony with André Watts: serving up a sumptuous Beethoven feast

by Tom Wachunas



I'm fairly sure that from its inception, the Canton Symphony Orchestra's much-anticipated Beethoven Festival that commenced on March 28 & 29 posed some challenging program questions. Which works could best celebrate the composer's genius while sating the appetites of his most ardent aficionados? Should the festival, spread across four concerts, be built upon only the symphonies?

As it is, each program can be appreciated as an edifying, forward-looking mini-survey of Beethoven's progressive climb toward the monumental achievement of his Ninth Symphony, which will close the festival on April 26. Specifically, the festival programs center around Beethoven's five piano concertos as they represent a steady, thoughtful journey into the composer's ever maturing explorations of pathos and joy. And who better to lead us on that journey than Maestro Gerhardt Zimmermann's colleague and long-time friend, pianist André Watts?

The March 28 concert opened with the *Coriolan Overture*, an intensely stormy and compact work from 1807 in sonata form. In many ways it presages the *Sturm und Drang* aspects of Beethoven's iconic Fifth Symphony, completed in the following year. Here, the string section rose to the occasion with brilliant solidity and finesse, flawlessly articulating the work's constant tension between two thematic developments – one agitated and bellicose, the other gentle and contemplative.

The orchestra was wholly enchanting in the evening's third selection — the overture and selections from the 1801 ballet *Die Geschöpfe Des Prometheus* (*The Creatures of Prometheus*). Particularly remarkable were the solo passages by Erica Snowden (principal cello) and Randy Klein (principal clarinet) in the Adagio following the overture, at once lilting and poignant.

Set between these two works, the second selection was a step back into Beethoven's youth. He was only 25 when he premiered his Piano Concerto No. 2 in 1795 (the first of his concertos for that instrument, though not published until after No. 1). While not as musically ambitious as his later works in the form, this shortest of his piano concertos nonetheless points to the emergence of a fresh and compelling lyricism. This was especially apparent in the slow movement. Watts navigated its torrent and tenderness with inspired – and inspiring — vigor and clarity.

The following evening's concert began with the orchestra's memorably crisp, sparkling rendition of selections from *Contradances*, composed in 1802. For all of its unpretentious charm, the collection is most significant for dance No. 7, which contains a theme first encountered in *The Creatures of Prometheus*, and more notably the finale of the magnificent third symphony, *Eroica*.

Then, the same inspired energy that sustained André Watts' astonishing virtuosity of the previous evening remained undiminished, and in fact was substantially augmented, in his performances of Piano Concertos No. 1 (1798) and No. 3 (1803). The slow movement in No.1 was utterly breathtaking in its searing emotionality, likewise the third movement in its unrestrained joy. It is in the third concerto however, where a newer lyrical substance and interplay with the orchestra came to fruition for Beethoven in a significant separation from the influences of Mozart and Haydn.

Interestingly enough, the only jarring moment of the evening came at the end of the slow movement of No. 3, an emotionally transcendent study in ethereal solemnity. It was followed immediately by the third movement without a pause between the two. No chance to breathe out, to savor even briefly the ineffable beauty of the music that had just unfolded. Still, Watts dutifully brought us back to earth, as it were, with the furious joviality of the finale. As in all of his performances, watching him play here was to see an artist physically pour himself into his instrument to draw out what can rightly be called the Beethovenian *Zeitgeist*.

Clearly spent yet exuberant at the end, Watts and Maestro Zimmermann quickly engaged in a triumphal hug. This spontaneous gesture of mutual adulation between conductor and soloist immediately prompted me to think that *all* of us in the auditorium, standing now in our boisterous ovation, had been spoken to and embraced by the spirit of Beethoven himself.

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