

Dazzling Liszt & Rossini treasures and a Berward gem from the Canton Symphony

by Tom Wachunas



The March 25 program by the Canton Symphony Orchestra, titled “Beethoven and His Contemporaries,” began with the *Overture and Turkish March*, the most often performed sections from the incidental music that Beethoven composed in 1811 for a play called *Die Ruinen Von Athen (The Ruins of Athens)*.

Absent from the music is the darker expressivity of strings we hear in many of the composer’s later works. Instead, the wind instruments, particularly the wistful and sprightly oboe soloing in the overture themes,

are the reigning voices. The ensemble was equally vivacious in its playing of the familiar *Turkish March*, evoking a palpable air of adventure.

It is that same venturesome energy that reigned throughout the riveting performance of Franz Berwald’s *Symphony No. 3 in C, “Sinfonie singulière”*, composed in 1845. This work, like the remaining two on the program — Liszt’s *Les Préludes* (1848) and Rossini’s *Overture To William Tell* (1829) — was composed after Beethoven’s death.

Singular indeed, with three movements rather than the traditional four, Berwald’s lavishly Romantic masterpiece seems to have taken a cue from Beethoven’s organic style of creating an atmosphere via tone painting, and had all the feel of a slowly unfolding journey. Amidst constant thematic ebbs and flows is the equipoise of Beethovenian *Stürm und Drang* and poignant contemplation. The playfulness between strings and woodwinds is a remarkable display of Berwald’s unarguable giftedness as both orchestrator and arranger.

So it is surprising that this symphony — a personal favorite of music director Gerhard Zimmermann, as he explained in his introductory comments — is so rarely performed live. A man on a mission, Zimmermann was determined to show us that his passion for

this oft-neglected work was not misplaced. The orchestra responded in kind. Brilliant in its detailed articulation of intricate colors and textures throughout, the ensemble was particularly gripping and fearless during the finale — a grand, outward spiraling of jubilant lyricism that clearly elated the audience.

The second half of the evening was even more exciting, beginning with Liszt's famous symphonic poem, *Les Préludes*. Zimmermann was further relishing his role of raconteur as he introduced the work with a story of Beethoven's meeting with the eleven year-old Franz Liszt. After the young pianist played the first movement of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, the Master was moved to say, "You go on ahead. You are one of the lucky ones! It will be your destiny to bring joy and delight to many people and that is the greatest happiness one can achieve".

As if taking that prophetic declaration to heart, the orchestra proceeded to "go on ahead" and dazzle us with an enchanting embodiment of Liszt's orchestral poetry. Following the lush "moods of spring and love," as Liszt called the first section, and the "storms of life" described in the second, the third section featured lilting phrases passed from harp to oboe, then on to clarinet and flute. It was a truly mesmerizing "peaceful idyll" that set the stage for the explosive, militant finale. Herein was a protracted, very loud burst of triumphal brass, the likes of which I've never heard from this ensemble, and one gratefully received with a boisterous standing ovation.

An invigorated Zimmermann the storyteller addressed the audience once more, now to remind us that Beethoven was not blessed with a bubbly personality, much less a bevy of real friends. Introducing Rossini's *Overture to William Tell*, he related Beethoven's assessment of the Italian's oeuvre on the occasion of their meeting in Vienna. While the ailing German stated that he was familiar with Rossini's *opera seria* (serious opera) works, he was apparently dismissive, saying, "...Opera seria is ill-suited to the Italians. You do not know how to deal with real drama." Ouch. This was no way to win friends.

Had he lived just a few more years, perhaps Beethoven would have appreciated just how serious Rossini could be. As it is, this Rossini work ranks as his longest and most sparkling achievement in the realm of operatic overtures. It has become a practically universal meme for dawn, storm, bucolic peace, and martial heroism. And who could forget its association with a certain masked equestrian avenger? Here, the orchestra played with electrifying vigor. From the reverential sweetness of cellos ushering in the sunrise and the swirling woodwinds and strings calling forth the violent brassy storm, to that iconic English horn announcing calm, and the unforgettable trumpet alarm and ensuing gallop, the entire performance was a breathtaking exposition of orchestral virtuosity.

It was during the second standing ovation on this evening that Beethoven's words to Liszt took on new relevance. *We*, the audience, were the lucky ones, happy witnesses to

the aural sublimity that is the Canton Symphony Orchestra.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 4, 2017.

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