

Cellist Mark Kosower highlights eclectic Canton Symphony Program (Oct. 27)

by Tom Wachunas



After hearing the very eclectic program offered by the Canton Symphony Orchestra at Umstadt Performing Arts Hall on October 27, I was finally convinced of something I had suspected on numerous previous occasions: every member of this ensemble, including music director Gerhardt Zimmermann, is an alchemist. What else could explain the transmutation of the instruments they play and the scores they read into vessels of such profound spirituality?

This uncanny phenomenon was wondrously evident in the evening's first selection, *Cantos in Memory of Benjamin Britten*, composed for string

orchestra by Arvo Pärt in 1977 as a memorial to the leading British composer of the mid-20th century who died in 1976. Pärt was greatly moved by what he called the “unusual purity” of Britten’s music.

This work is so stunning in its hypnotic simplicity that the players themselves seemed mesmerized as they articulated an utterly ethereal reality. At the beginning, a solitary tubular bell rang out three times, followed by the whispered entry of very high violins that introduced the haunting melodic idea. Like a rolling mist, that single motif descended progressively into lower registers from violins to violas, then to cellos, then to the basses, and all against the ceaseless tolling of the bell. Most intriguing is how gradually through time the tempo slowed while the volume of sound increased to a roar until, at its loudest point, it suddenly stopped. We were left with just the sound of one more bell softly ringing and fading away into breathtaking, mystical quiet. It was silence with a pulse — an achingly poignant arrival at reverential, even tearful introspection.

That was the calm before the stormy opening of the next work on the program, Benjamin Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem*, composed in 1940. Britten, an avowed pacifist, was commissioned by the Japanese government (at that time engaged in war with China) to write a work commemorating 2,600 years of Japan's ruling Mikado dynasty. Perhaps the Japanese didn't fully comprehend the implications of the work when they initially approved the title. After it was played through during a rehearsal in Tokyo, the score was rejected. The angry Japanese foreign ministry found the work's Christian liturgical references disturbing and otherwise culturally inappropriate. The work has no references to the Japanese dynastic anniversary, and the titles of its three movements have no liturgical specificity as such, but rather speak to the intense emotional trajectory of the work — Britten's feelings about war.

It is a trajectory replete with alternately thunderous, writhing, and lush melodies voiced in layers by every section of the orchestra, all executed here with electrifying aplomb. The first movement, "*Lacrymosa*," began with the startling ferocity of timpani blows, sounding like cannon fire, followed by a slow lament from the brooding cellos. The frenzied second movement, "*Dies Irae*," ranks among Britten's greatest feats of orchestral writing. With remarkable fervor, the Orchestra conjured the full outbreak of war, symbolized by piercing flutes, snarling rapid-fire triplet figures from the trumpets, and explosive syncopations from the brass. In the third movement, "*Requiem Aeternam*," all that grim tumult was left behind to impart a spirit of peace that concluded with a sustained, consoling note from the clarinet.

For the next two selections, the world-class artistry of the CSO was all the more augmented by guest soloist Mark Kosower, principal cello of The Cleveland Orchestra. His performance here of Victor Herbert's *Concerto No. 2* was a transcendent musical magnet, riveting in how it gripped and drew us progressively deeper into the work's dramatic mood shifts. From the plaintive opening melody of the first movement, seeming to leap from the churning textures crisply described by the ensemble, then into the wistful, heart-rending melodic journey of the second movement, and throughout the lyrical aggressiveness of the final movement with all its daunting passages of rapid sixteenth notes, Kosower's mellow tonality was a constant, clearly sensual presence, and always in perfect balance with the ensemble.

The soloist's virtuosity was equally compelling throughout Dvořák's *Rondo for Cello and Orchestra*. Kosower is an artist whose prowess rests not only in his dazzling, unfaltering technical precision, but more importantly, in giving palpable form to unmitigated passion. He transforms the cello into a sublimely emotive force.

Speaking of emotive forces, the evening ended with a titillating rendition of George Enescu's *Romanian Rhapsody No. 1*, composed in 1901. Rhapsodic indeed, this vivacious medley of Romanian-flavored folk songs and dances was delivered with infectious abandon. While Medieval alchemists failed in their attempts to concoct a universal potion to cure all disease, the CSO alchemists were eminently successful in brewing up a delicious elixir of pure jubilation.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 5, 2018.

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