

Contemporary Youth Orchestra with Pompa-Baldi & a Steinway Spirio (Nov. 16)

by Peter Feher



It's tempting to think that learning only goes one way in a youth orchestra concert. Young musicians see months of rehearsal realized, often on a classic piece, maybe one they've never performed before. The Contemporary Youth Orchestra concert on November 16 at Tri-C East's Mandel Theater satisfied that equation, and then offered something new.

Gustav Holst's titan-sized *The Planets* occupied the second half of the program, but the real energy and inventiveness came in the first, with the world premiere of a piano concerto that took a far-from-standard approach to the genre. Under music director Liza Grossman's leadership, the new work, Robert Piana's *Concerto Fantastique*, put the relationship between conductor, soloist, and orchestra under the spotlight, to the benefit of the audience as much as the students.

Conceptually, a number of elements in the execution of *Concerto Fantastique* were competing for attention. It was by turns a showcase for CYO, the concerto debut of a novel instrument (Steinway's Spirio, a high-end player piano), and a broader commentary on music and technology. As originally advertised, pianist Antonio Pompa-Baldi would record the solo part in advance, and the Spirio would render it in performance, with CYO accompanying. On Saturday, Pompa-Baldi himself alternated movements with the Spirio, a practical decision made in rehearsals that had artistic repercussions.

Heard side by side, the reciprocal performances of the Spirio and Pompa-Baldi revealed the virtues of a live soloist and the inevitable weaknesses of a manufactured one. The Spirio's defining quality was an overwhelming delicacy of sound. This suited the waltz

rhythms of the third-movement Allegro, but one tended to forget the piano was playing in the opening Paritura, a movement of Rachmaninoff proportions. The sound of Pompa-Baldi's live playing came immediately forward, a consequence of being able to respond to the hall and the orchestra. Not coincidentally, he decided to play the most expressive and virtuosic movements — Cinderella and Tarantella — live as well.

For conductor and musicians, Piana's lyrical score provided a wealth of opportunities, from symphonically-structured ritornellos to inspired instrumental pairings (trumpet and piccolo, for one). With the Spirio, Grossman served as tough-love intermediary, negotiating between an uncompromising soloist and her students' needs. She and the orchestra revelled when Pompa-Baldi joined in. The ensemble in these movements was precise, perhaps sharpened by the demands of the player piano.

In a typical symphony concert, the relationship between soloist and orchestra is polished over, regardless of the tensions underneath. To make that give-and-take the subject of a performance invites the audience to hear a piece in the way a performer might. Transforming the listener into a participant was a major accomplishment for Piana, Grossman, Pompa-Baldi, and CYO.

The Holst suite presented both rewards and challenges: interdependent parts, big musical moments, exposed passages throughout the ensemble. Grossman and CYO gave the daunting piece a characterful reading, emphasizing the mood and affect of each movement. The orchestra sounded its best when it captured a spirit — the menace of "Mars," the dual lightness and seriousness of "Jupiter," and the dispersed, esoteric sounds of "Neptune," the last of which featured the Tri-C Vocal Arts Academy and Cleveland School of the Arts Chorus. The movements with less direction — "Venus" and "Saturn" — tended to wander, but they often do in performance. Concertmaster Jamie Berland added some tasteful portamenti to her solos, and cellist Torrance Gaskins sounded confident and lovely in brief solo lines. Like the preceding concerto, this *Planets* reaffirmed that ambition gets at the heart of live performance.

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