

A Magnificent Feast from the Canton Symphony (Apr. 30)

by Tom Wachunas



Talk about perfect timing. In this abysmal era so saturated with our blood and tears, along comes the Canton Symphony Orchestra (CSO) with its inspiring April 30 concert, called *Music For Humanity*, presenting a lavish feast to feed yearning souls.

The first half of the evening featured two works conducted by the vivacious associate conductor Matthew Jenkins Jaroszewicz, beginning with *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman No. 1*. Composed in 1986 by Joan Tower, the work was inspired by Aaron Copland's iconic

fanfare and employed the same instrumentation of brass and percussion.

Tower dedicated this surprisingly brief work to “women who take risks and are adventurous.” Adventurous to be sure. While the opening theme is a subtle echo of Copland's, the CSO brass was remarkably bright, crisp and crackling in its relentless morphing of the motif into quick, layered variations, both delicate and discordant, robustly spiced with startling bursts of timpani.

The banquet continued with an especially delectable hors d'oeuvre in the form of Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Serenade to Music*. Williams composed the work in 1938 for orchestra and 16 singers as a grand ode to the life-affirming potentiality of music. The sung text was adapted from a lovely scene in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, wherein two lovers pause on their walk through a verdant estate, glimmering in the moonlight, mesmerized as they listen to a group of musicians playing nearby.

Mesmerizing indeed, the orchestra and choir here were a remarkable personification of that entranced couple, investing this wondrously atmospheric meditation with a rhapsodic reverence.



After the intermission, music director Gerhardt Zimmermann joined his orchestra along with the Canton Symphony Chorus, directed by Britt Cooper, and University of Mount Union Choir, directed by Grant Cook. Here then was the Maestro, the intrepid master-chef, if you will, at his most technically astute, emotionally alert, even brave.

Astride the pinnacle of his interpretive prowess, Zimmermann and his brilliant co-conspirators served up the evening's main course — the most enlivening recipe for pure symphonic magnificence ever composed: Beethoven's groundbreaking Symphony No. 9, Op. 125, "Choral."

Like misty storm clouds, tremolo strings in the first movement whispered, then swelled into fragmented themes suggesting the cruel vicissitudes that haunted Beethoven's life. The unmitigated, largely upbeat intensity of the Scherzo movement — briskly stated, but

never too rushed — was a decidedly more jovial probing of hope, giving way to the contemplative, majestic melancholy of the third movement. Throughout these movements, the orchestra consistently navigated the complexities of intertwined colors, textures and moods with a riveting clarity and precision.

Then came the colossal, episodic final movement, a sumptuous regale in itself. The jarring, momentary uproar of the opening settled into short-lived snippets of themes from the previous movements, all quickly dismissed with the emergence of a new theme in the low strings that steadily grew into a full-fledged hymn.

And just as the music seemed poised for yet another dark storm, a very loud halt was called by a lone, stern and rumbling voice from, of all places, the audience. Striding down a side aisle and stepping up on to the stage like a general joining his troops, baritone soloist David Small sang out the first stanza of Friedrich Schiller’s anthemic poem, *Ode to Joy*: “O Friends! Not these sad tones! Let us raise our voices together in more pleasant and joyful tones!”



Thenceforth, it felt like all of heaven breaking loose. The combined choruses repeated the baritone’s words with utterly breathgiving power, and joining the exultant proceedings were the other members of the superb vocal quartet: Rachel Hall, soprano, Diane Fox, mezzo-soprano, and John Pickle, tenor. Their singing — crystalline and radiant — was enough to make angels jealous.

The symphony’s thunderous final note brought the enthralled audience immediately to their feet in an equally thunderous roar of approval. And gratitude, I’m sure, for a great service rendered. After all, in these increasingly sad and troubled times, the CSO had just fed us a generous helping of unfettered joy.

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