

Canton Symphony pays tribute to William Blair III (April 2)

by Kevin McLaughlin



In a moving tribute to the recently deceased Canton Symphony board member and Northeast Ohio arts advocate William Blair III, Gerhardt Zimmermann and the Canton Symphony offered a varied program on Sunday, April 2, an evening full of musical depths and satisfying performances. Organist Heather Cooper, the Orchestra's near constant companion onstage, sparkled as soloist.

The presence of organ at this concert was in honor of Blair, an organist himself, but it also brought a wonderful expansion to the orchestral palette. Cooper was featured, whether as soloist or as added texture, in nearly every piece. Her playing was consistently first rate, the only downside may have been a decreasing sense of the instrument's specialness as the concert progressed.

Originally conceived as a work for large brass ensemble, Richard Strauss's noble *Feierlicher Einzug* was presented in Zimmermann's adroitly reorchestrated version. Resourcefully synthesizing Strauss's original with Max Reger's adaptation for organ, woodwinds, and timpani, and adding strings, Zimmermann's was a thicker, lusher arrangement making excellent use of the organ's registrations. It is a lovely work, and was an appropriately stately and solemn way to begin the concert.

Michael Daugherty's ability to color and craft arresting sound images was on full display in his *Once Upon A Castle*, described by the composer as a "symphonie concertante" for organ and orchestra. The descriptive program and intriguing movement titles helped to

keep the listener following along, and the organ, played spectacularly by Cooper, lent power and vividness to every narrative detail.



Inspired by the life and legendary abode of the American newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, *Once Upon a Castle* gave off more than a whiff of Hollywood on Sunday. Though a modern organ concerto, it is an attractive, nostalgic work, evocative of particular events in American memory — features that Blair would have appreciated. Cinematic spookiness in the organ is juxtaposed with thrilling *Daphnis and Chloe* splashes of color in the orchestra. Percussionists contributed leitmotifs (such as sleigh bells to conjure the Rosebud memory) and odd metered pulsations to convey a sense of general tumult. If anyone in the audience hadn't yet visited San Simeon or seen the movie *Citizen Kane*, they have now.

Trumpeter Kevin Natoli played the exposed high solos in the second movement nicely, with the right amount of exotic spice. Concertmaster Konrad Kowal's excellent playing, in violent clash with Cooper during the Rosebud movement, was suitably hair-raising. Percussionists Alyson Rzeszotarski, Jeremy Sreejayan, and Matthew Larsen added luminous color and ferocity, and timpanist John Curtis held everything together.

Cooper took several deserving bows, and then, as if looking for more to do, she added an encore just before intermission: the Finale from Mendelssohn's Organ Sonata No. 1.



By way of introduction to Widor's Toccata, which began the second half, Zimmermann confided his long-held wish to orchestrate an accompaniment to the work, ever since it was played at his wedding 49 years ago. Cooper's rendition showed her clean, secure command of the piece, not to mention soundness of judgment regarding tempo.

A stage reconfiguration followed, reducing the orchestra to a strings-only band for J.S. Bach's transcription of Vivaldi's *Concerto in a*, BWV 593. Cooper approached the piece with majestic pacing, but introduced bright registration and a smartness of technique that resulted in an overall brisk and bright reading.

The next work, Elgar's Nimrod from the *Enigma Variations*, was an extra, not appearing on the printed program. One of Blair's favorite pieces, Zimmermann and the orchestra gave it an assured performance. The strings played with long bow strokes, achieving a rich, emotional timbre and an interpretation that was expressive without being self-indulgent. The last chord resonated in the hall a good long time. Zimmermann, as he had promised, held up his hand after the cutoff to maintain the silence, and the stillness in the hall made for a special moment.

Composer Rick Robinson was in attendance to hear his *Chaconne for Interesting Times*, a world premiere in its current form. The work was composed in reaction to calamitous world events in 2020 and 2021. The basic concept and sonorities (a repeating chord progression and variations) are reminiscent of Brahms and Bach, but with innovative and beautiful uses of orchestral resources.

Cooper rejoined the orchestra in the last work on a long program, Franz Liszt's tone poem *Hunnenschlacht* ("Battle of the Huns"). The orchestra seemed to respond and revitalize under Liszt's imaginative writing. Organ chorales alternated with increasingly agitated orchestral responses, and for the energetic finale the horns got to whoop it up in mighty cries of battle.

An organ is by its nature a communal instrument: physically huge with an enveloping sound. As the performances of Gerhardt Zimmermann, Heather Cooper, and the Canton Symphony happily enveloped Sunday's audience, a sense of common understanding grew among those gathered: here was a way — maybe the best way — to memorialize Blair's life, his love of the organ, his commitment to the Canton musicians, and his belief in the human need for making and enjoying music together.

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