

A night to treasure

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Vernon audiences were inspired to rise to their feet on two occasions during Inspirations, the Okanagan Symphony Orchestra's first concert of 2009.

Despite the heavy snowfall Sunday night, audiences braved the inclement weather to join Rosemary Thomson and the OSO as they presented a concert of diversity and musical treasures.

Thomson chose to begin the evening with Sergei Prokofiev's Classical Symphony in D major.

Written in 1917, the exuberant joy and playfulness of this piece, in contrast to the ensuing Bolshevik Revolution, was Prokofiev's homage to the classical forms of Haydn and Mozart. Composed when Prokofiev was only 27, this piece with its daring leaps and innovative orchestration, was very entertaining and full of youthful energy. From pizzicato playfulness to the heavy Russian boot-stomping of the third movement to the fast sleigh ride-type romp at the end, it was a delightful introduction by the symphony players.

The incredible artistry of clarinetist James Campbell, performing Mozart's Clarinet Concerto K622, accompanied so beautifully by the OSO, was transcendent.

Here was divine inspiration which clearly exemplified the concert's title.

It is a rare but memorable occasion to experience a musician like Campbell. His masterful technique created an organic performance where the audience literally observed the musical mind of Mozart. In the famous second movement, the composer poured out of Campbell, while the tears poured out of us. At times it seemed the music was improvised as the phrasing and interpretations were so alive and new as if being heard for the first time.

Gabriel Faure's Masques and Bergamasques, like the first piece of the evening, was also written in counterpoint to the political upheavals of the times, being completed in 1919.

Thomson's intention to spirit us away from the Canadian winter was successful with this impressionistic work depicting an 18th century Italian garden party replete with masks and rustic dances. The lightness in the orchestration and the technical skill of the players took us to a time of romantic fantasies.

In another dimension of light music, we heard B.C. composer Stephen Chatman's Prairie Dawn, a one-movement work for clarinet, harp and string orchestra.

Chatman's brilliant scoring of colour and subtle dynamics created a beautiful reflection of the prairie landscape with its wide open spaces, meadowlarks and long rays of morning light. The OSO created so many lovely ensemble moments of shimmering sostenutos and well-balanced colourful textures. Featured again on the clarinet was "King of the Clarinet" Campbell, whose incredible mastery on his instrument added to the subtle changes in the colours of the prairie landscape.

The Aura Chamber Choir, formed in 1979 by director Imant Raminsh, and Kelowna soprano Dawn Mussellam joined forces with the OSO to perform the symphony premiere of Raminsh's own Missa Brevis or "short mass."

Aura conducted by Raminsh performed this original work in 2006 at Carnegie Hall, an honour befitting the internationally-recognized B.C. composer.

In the fourth movement work (the Credo is omitted), Raminsh expresses prayerful invocation with joyous celebration, and at times there were moments of harmonic balance between the orchestra and choir that resembled the multi-layered textural sound of a cathedral pipe organ, appropriate for a sacred work.

Although Mussellam was at times overshadowed by the force of the orchestra and choir, her dramatic vocal colouring was clearly projected, lending additional warmth and depth.

Orchestra, choir and soloist did a remarkable job presenting this modern work full of intricate harmonies, mixed meters and challenging ensemble playing. The standing ovation they received was a fitting recognition for this exposition of the skills and talents involved.

Thomson certainly gave us distractions from our winter woes with her selection of a diverse repertoire from the sacred to the silly, written by composers, local and legendary. Inspirations was definitely an evening to treasure.