

Shepherds heed the call

Lisa Talesnick

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The Okanagan Symphony, led by Rosemary Thomson, with special guest artists Tracy Fehr and the Kelowna Pipe Band, play to a full house at the Vernon Performing Arts Centre Sunday.

Photo: Stephanie Loo de Nevers

I don't think a bah-hum-bug'er could have survived the Okanagan Symphony Orchestra's sold-out Christmas celebration Sunday night at the Performing Arts Centre.



There were eight pipers piping, nine brass a-flashing, the concertmaster dancing, Rosemary sopranoing, a candy cane a-bowing, Santa's cymbals crashing, the full house a carolling, Bob and Doug on oboe, a new baby Kroecker and a kilted drummer boy in the key of E... (flat).

Oy.

Here's a little confession. When I was in Grade 2, my family moved to the Scottish "kingdom" of Kingston, Ont.

For show and tell, Robbie Malcolm showed us his family plaque, he wore his clan's kilt, and did the sword dance. My heart sank. I couldn't believe I wasn't born Scottish.

You know, my heart sank the same way Sunday as it did 40 years ago when the pipers entered the hall.

And playing my favourite carol of all time, Little Drummer Boy, on pipes, with orchestral backing, with an earnest drummer in front leading the band.... You had me at those Scottish knees.

I died and went to Scottish heaven. (I knew I'd get there somehow.)

You know, it's ridiculously rare for a pipe band to play with orchestra. It's practically unheard of. The pitch of the pipes is just above 470 Hertz, while the orchestra is used to tuning at around 440.

Thomson brought the pipers down as much as they could, and rose the OSO as much as she could. But she left the gap between to carry the magic. And it did. The blend of the strings with the pipes was enchanting. Deep, rich and full. I think the conjuring up of such a presentation is nothing short of a gift.

A gift, a thought, or a word coming from the heart, lands on the heart. The point is, there was presence for everyone.

Maestra Thomson sang with soprano Tracy Fehr in a selection from Handel's Messiah. Fehr so beautifully added a third selection: "Rejoice O daughter of Zion, for thy king cometh unto thee." The next verse, from Zechariah 2:10 is: "For I have been dwelling within you."

I know this, because I chanted it in Hebrew for my bat mitzvah ceremony when I was 12 years old. I didn't have a clue what it meant then, but now I do.

You are the very place where God expresses itself.

Thomson said the focus of this year's OSO Christmas was the humble, lowly shepherd. As she said those words, an experience I had last summer came to mind.

I was at a spring north of Bethlehem, filling jerry cans of water for my friend Abed Abd-Rabo.

Abed had tired of a political struggle that left him living in the nearby Deheishe refugee camp. His family's land had lay barren for years, due to battles and border shuffles between Israel and the Palestinians. But Abed still had the deed, though, he didn't have a permit to enter the land under Israeli control.

Nevertheless, he moved into the cave on the land and started tending animals and growing vegetables. With nothing but a drum, a tarp and a pot for water, Abed pitched a large tent and opened his land up for people from all nations to come and tend the land together, to sing and drum and celebrate and share a cup of tea.

He's suspect by both sides. Israel eyes his land as a profitable housing project tacked on to the south end of Jerusalem. Palestinians aren't sure he's keeping within their political agenda.

But Abed loves the land, and he loves people, and he yearns for peace, brotherhood and togetherness. The tension is building by the day. He's regularly brought into Israel for interrogations and he stands to lose it all at any moment.

I'd like to ask you all a favour. There's nothing you can do for Abed, except maybe one thing. Just say a little prayer for him.

Maybe if all of us here in the Okanagan open our hearts to a lowly humble shepherd just outside of Bethlehem, maybe something fine and just can happen there. Just maybe. It worked there once before...

Oh, and one more thing, while I was filling the water containers for Abed, a dusty man appeared and asked if he could help. I said sure. He held the containers under the spring one by one until all seven of the plastic containers were filled.

When he finished, I thanked him and asked him his name.

"Issa," he said.

It's a relatively common name in the area. It means Jesus in Arabic, like the way Mexicans use the name.

"Where are you from?" I asked him.

"Beit Lehem," he said, Arabic for Bethlehem.

We said good-bye, and as I left, I realized my water had been filled by Jesus from Bethlehem.
Merry Christmas everyone!