

May 8, 2010

Finally it was here: Beethoven's Symphony No.9 featured in the last concert of the Okanagan Symphony concert season. Over 600 music lovers were scrambling into Penticton Trade and Convention Centre to secure a passable seat in the crowded hall.

Music director/conductor Rosemary Thomson has been successful in selecting suitable repertoire for the orchestra and attracting an increasing number of fans. For this special event Rosemary Thomson revived the Okanagan Symphony Chorus, bringing together singers from throughout the Okanagan and from the Calgary Philharmonic Chorus.

It was exciting to watch the 105 Choristers file in behind the orchestra. The four soloists Soprano Heidi Muendel, Mezzo Soprano Judith Forst, Tenor Peter Collins and Baritone/Bass Randall Jakobsh took their places in front of the orchestra. After a few introductory words by Rosemary Thomson, Composer Imant Ramish appeared on stage. Imant Ramish, Principal Second Violinist of the OSO, whose compositions are played worldwide, has been commissioned with a choral work to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Okanagan Symphony. As a libretto Imant Ramish choose "Quaternity", a poem by multi talented Lyricist Becky Strube, who also is his wife. "Quaternity", a union or group of four, reflects the passing seasons in the Okanagan. "Spring Just Suddenly So" had fresh colours with flute, triangle and xylophone. "Untamed Aria" evoked succulent vegetation with modern harmonics and virtuoso trumpet playing. "Footfall (Okanagan Valley)" with the single cello-lines and the clearness of the soprano voice was reminiscent of lone hikes through ponderosa stands. In "Scintillation of Snow" the spectrum of vowels in the word white unfolded in the choir and the orchestra layered sounds like blankets of snow.

The charming intimacy of our Okanagan microcosm made way to European grandeur with Beethoven's glorious Symphony No. 9. In the first movement I detected Beethoven's trademark: three quick, often repeated notes followed by a long accentuated sound. Ominous drum rolls and minor keys added an ominous air. The second movement, Scherzo, had a frantically galloping tempo. There was a graceful sunny middle part with rich dynamics and effective pauses. The slow third movement, conducted by Rosemary Thomson without her baton, evoked an idyllic pastoral scene.

Preparing for a grand finale, snippets from earlier themes passed through the orchestra, until the famous "Ode to Joy" melody appeared in the basses. First conceived in 1824 this universal song can still be heard everywhere today: in wedding celebrations, piano method books and cell-phone ring tones. The words, taken from a poem by Friedrich Schiller speak of joy as a wondrous spark that unites all mankind in brotherhood and assures us of a loving creator's presence.

The soloists shone in their renditions of the wonderful verses sung in German. Jubilant the choir joined in with energy and enthusiasm. Shouts of bravo rewarded them as a grateful audience showered them with applause. It had been a truly memorable performance.

Roswitha Masson