

Written by Frederick Morden
Monday, 20 February 2012 06:30

I expected musical love in the Quad City Symphony Orchestra's Valentine's concert on February 11, but I was surprised where I found it.

Guest conductor Alondra de la Parra programmed familiar "romantic" music in Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakoff's symphonic narrative of *Scheherazade* (a princess whose beguiling stories prevented her execution and ultimately led to marriage) and Maurice Ravel's *Bolero*, made popular by the sexy comedy

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Yet Spanish composer Joaquin Rodrigo's guitar concerto – inspired by his wife – and a rousing and unexpected Latin American encore captured my musical heart.

Big, bold, and at times a little unwieldy, *Scheherazade* and the Spanish dance *Bolero*, with their additional instrumental personnel, were the pillars of the program.

But its soft, soulful center belonged to a captivating, fresh performance of Rodrigo's orchestral chamber work *Concierto de Aranjuez* played with restrained bravado and confident introspection by guitar soloist Robert Belinic. He and the orchestra fashioned a scintillating musical relationship between French impressionistic orchestration and Spanish themes with Moorish harmonies.

Despite occasional balance problems, the orchestra's light touch and gestural playing allowed Belinic's vibrant performance to emerge. Through various classical-guitar techniques, he was able to adjust the timbre to match the varying emotional content in the music. The fingernail tips produced fanciful colors and faster articulations, the side of his thumbnail emphasis. In the fingertip improvisational flourishes, for example, he kept the segmented melodic line foremost in the listener's ear by anchoring the melody with his thumbnail. In the haunting second-movement cadenza, he brought the musical conversation to an intimate whisper with music that Rodrigo's wife confessed was "inspired by our honeymoon" in a reluctant admission after the composer's death.

Belinic's cohesive artistic approach and seemingly unlimited tonal palette combined with Rodrigo's moving music to create a depth of musical expression that seemed both inevitable and complete, characteristics that eluded the orchestra in the concert's bigger pieces.

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Spanning the first half of the concert, *Scheherazade's* challenging music offered many examples of artful playing by members individually and as an ensemble, including the understated first-movement solos in the horn and flute. The oboe solo in the second movement was playful in one moment and then expansive. The bassoon's versatile performance of Scheherazade's theme was buoyant and coquettish. Despite a mannered beginning to the third movement, the string section poured out vibrant music in the introductory airy theme. Their 32nd-note arcs were wispy with just the right amount of hide-and-seek. The extremely difficult piccolo and flute embellishments of the last movement were masterfully articulated. The percussion section played with sensitivity and taste, enhancing the orchestra's sound like the scattering of exotic spices over a complex dish.

But despite flashes of virtuosic playing, the sense of high adventure, drama, and a legendary character was lost in the generally unimaginative performance. At the outset, the nautical "barcarole" rhythmic engine was too slow, with Sinbad's ship sailing in molasses instead of the undulating waters of an ocean. In arguably the most challenging movement, "Kalender Prince" – with sudden changes of tempo and free-flowing virtuosic solo passages over strict rhythmic accompaniment – the principal winds showed impressive skill but lacked interpretive consistency in imitative passages, especially the fragmented exchanges of Scheherazade's theme. In the sweeping diatonic-scale arcs between alternating woodwinds in the "Prince & Princess" movement, egregious differences were a distraction.

The intermittent entrances of Scheherazade's theme in the solo violin not only connect the music to the story, but its melodic variations indicate a change in her character – from technically straightforward to complex, and from emotionally relaxed to intense. But the violin solo lacked that dynamism, making the character dull instead of enchanting.

The concert finale, Ravel's rhythmic juggernaut *Bolero*, was also a search for a consistent interpretive design amid wide differences in melodic treatment. At the extremes of some solo instruments' ranges, *Bolero's* difficult wind parts made management of Ravel's sinuous tune difficult. In addition, differences in instrumental timbres, and particularly variations in melodic and dynamic nuance, revealed a lack of control over the iconic long, gradual crescendo. But the critical snare-drum part, requiring 15 minutes of unremitting precision, was flawless.

With *Bolero's* emphatic ending, the audience burst into applause. As it faded, a group of 10 or so tenacious listeners kept it going, drawing an encore from the maestra and the orchestra. De

Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places: The Quad City Symphony, February 11 at the Adler

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la Parra led the orchestra through Argentinean Alberto Ginestera's exhilarating "Malambo" (from his *Estancia Suite*), with euphoric dance rhythms and sparkling Latin percussion sounds.

The encore captured de la Parra's passion and boundless energy. Her powerful movements were characterized by vigorous repeating beat patterns in her right hand and florid expressiveness in her left.

But in the larger-scale pieces – *Scheherazade* and *Bolero* – I searched in vain to find her distinct interpretive voice within the performance. In the big and bigger slower gestures within compound meters, the orchestra lost its cohesion, needing some indication of the inner pulse between her long beats. It felt like her quest for the dramatic sometimes left the practical necessities for musical clarity unattended.

Still, her natural affinity for the Latin music of Rodrigo and Ginestera brought a unique glow to the musical love fest. In her hands, the joyful encore left the Adler audience singing and whistling the catchy tune into the cold night. It left me wondering: Alondra de la Parra conducting an all-Latin American concert?

The Quad City Symphony Orchestra's next Masterworks concert will feature the Benjamin Britten masterpiece War Requiem and will be held March 3 in the Adler Theatre and March 4 in Augustana College's Centennial Hall. For more information, visit QCSymphony.com

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