

Finding the Big Picture in the Details: The QC Symphony, December 7 at the Adler Theatre

Written by Frederick Morden

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Through the thick melodic honey of Russian Romanticism and the ever-changing musical illusions of a contemporary American composition, the Quad City Symphony on December 7 fashioned a successful concert from two divergent approaches to lyricism. Although the symphony occasionally blurred the differences between melodies and their accompaniments, they achieved resplendent moments of uplifting splendor in both pieces.

The program paired Jennifer Higdon's imaginative, three-movement *Violin Concerto* – which won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize – with Sergei Rachmaninoff's profusely tuneful *Symphony No. 2*. Separated by a century of musical development, these works feature vast differences in compositional technique and tonality: Rachmaninoff worked in the customary symphonic form while Higdon writes improvisationally, and Rachmaninoff used traditional harmonic structure while Higdon employs a variety of tonal systems developed during the 20th Century.

But they are similar in using lyricism or songfulness as the primary means of self-expression. Consequently, in both cases, the artistic challenge for the Quad City Symphony was the same: to emphasize, with dynamics and stylistic nuances, melodic and motivic fragments and differentiate them from background sounds and accompaniment – a task the orchestra and its guest conductor struggled with in the first movement of Rachmaninoff and throughout Higdon.

Over an hour long and easily one of the most popular works in the symphonic repertoire, the second Rachmaninoff symphony was an evolutionary

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performance that moved gradually from the forest to the trees. It began by allowing the thick, textural density of the orchestration played by a majority of the musicians to bury the structurally essential motivic dialogue of a few. But, by the third movement, the orchestra was producing distinct musical statements – a direct reflection of what was shown to the musicians by guest conductor Alasdair Neale.

In the first movement, Neale made general, wide, sweeping gestures to the orchestra without specific emphasis to the architectural glue of the composition--the motifs found in the individual instrumental parts. These all-purpose movements made it difficult for the orchestra and listeners to distinguish one tune from another, melody versus accompaniment. The result was a homogeneous sound so impenetrable in texture that the melodic conversation between intermittent solo instruments was lost for most of the movement. Neale conducted the string section's harmonic changes when the melody was in the flute, showed the march-like accompaniment in the strings when the tune was in the oboe, and encouraged the upper strings with his back to the principal melody in the cello section.

In the second movement, the transparency of musical dialogue was markedly improved, with an imposing variety of tone color and characterization from the string section. At first, the galloping tune in the first violins sparkled with well-defined articulation in the syncopated rhythms. This was followed by a deliciously sumptuous linear second theme that included all the string players with soaring melodic arches. A fugal section at the "Meno Mosso" – led by a strong second-violin section – was quickly and robustly imitated by the violas, cellos, and basses.

Putting his stick aside for the third movement, Neale molded a radiant mixture of musical intimacy and intensity. His slower tempo allowed the principal clarinet time to create a musical journey in the extended solo and gave the orchestra space to let the music breathe more deeply, creating goose-bump moments. Neale artfully guided the orchestra from soft, seminal beginnings through long, ascending melodic sequences of ever-rising imitative lines to a climax of great heart and unrestrained expression.

The string section's concentration of sound was immense in the third movement, bringing greater tension and emotion into the musical flow. Motivic exchanges between instruments were undulating in intensity, breathing one phrase into life while leading to another with a sense of inevitability. The first violin's softness and vulnerability created breath-holding moments of artistic tenderness that grew into strong, passionate statements of musical affirmation. As the emotional tension of the music was fading near the end of the movement, the viola section, with its soulful core sound, took up the tune one last time and boldly, profoundly brought Rachmaninoff's iconic, bittersweet melody to an end.

In the fourth movement, the clarity of musical conversation continued in a faster tempo. Distinct entrances of thematic fragments were consistently articulated, revealing a vigorous musical dialogue. Neale's non-specific gestures from the first movement had given way to precise signals for each specific entrance of instrumental families and individual solos in the last. It also intensified motivic energy, the musical engine that produced the anticipation and momentum that drove the music toward a triumphant ending.

In the Higdon concerto first-movement cadenza, solo violinist Naha Greenholtz brought the full breadth of her cantabile sound into the hall, displaying reverberant sweetness – never rough – through the full spectrum of the instrument's range. In the last movement, Greenholtz, with folk-like fiddling, danced all over the fingerboard, moving from the scroll up to her chin through changing meters and occasional bursts from the orchestra. During the rapid changes of keys, Greenholtz's intonation was solid, moving up in tonality and increasing the tension toward a dazzling finish.

The concerto includes a handful of musical illusions – where instrumental timbre is so similar that it's difficult to separate the fabric of sounds into individual threads. In these sections,

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both soloist and orchestra were well-balanced and effective. Beautiful interplay between Greenholtz, the English horn, the solo cello, and others produced contrasting counterpoint, especially in the first and second movements.

To the extent that Higdon's lyrical approach is similar to Rachmaninoff's – with long sequences of ascending melodic lines – the symphony's performance of the *Violin Concerto* made sense. The lush, dissonant note clusters produced rich harmonic colors ebbing and flowing from one dramatic high point to another.

But in passages with contemporary changes in meter and melodic fragmentation – both of which demand concise gestural playing – the orchestra's homogeneously smooth sound obscured the clarity of Higdon's beautifully intricate, layered composition.

And, near the end of the first movement, the pacing seemed too quick, forcing Greenholtz to gloss over instead of bear into the highly ornamented improvisation-like figures between stationary tones.

Despite these distractions, Higdon and Rachmaninoff were effectively performed, a brilliant pairing of two contrasting compositions achieving an overarching balance between contemporary musical thinking and a long-standing musical staple.

Frederick Morden is a retired orchestra-music director, conductor, composer, arranger, educator, and writer who has served on the executive board of the Conductors Guild. He can be reached at f.morden@mchsi.com.