

## A Fine “Line” Over Rough Spots: The QC Symphony, March 8 at the Adler Theatre

Written by Frederick Morden  
Tuesday, 18 March 2014 08:04

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The Quad City Symphony’s March 8 concert featured symphonies from a pair of big names, but the shortest piece on the program – the world premiere of local composer Jacob Bancks’ *Rock Island Line* – stole the show.

The broad, moving lyricism of Brahms’ *Symphony No. 2* illustrated what the orchestra does well, while Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 8* revealed the Quad City Symphony’s continuing struggle with rhythmic precision.

Yet they were eclipsed by the triumphant debut that opened the concert. *Rock Island Line* was the highlight of the evening at the Adler Theatre – an energized, complex, and entertaining performance that brought Bancks’ vivid piece to life in ways I wasn’t expecting.

Under the baton of Music Director and Conductor Mark Russell Smith, Bancks’ 12-minute composition – inspired by Quad Cities history and topography – was a sonic tour de force, creating new, brilliant, effervescent musical colors with imaginative contemporary tonal language and orchestration.

I had the score in front of me, but after the first few measures, I put it down to avoid missing anything; Bancks’ sound was so engaging and fresh. I had [studied his score already](#) and had a clear idea of where the music was going, but the actual live experience was dazzling beyond what I had imagined. All I could do was sit there, transfixed by his musical imagination pouring

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out through the orchestra.

The performance was crisp and infused with driving energy in both big moments with the entire orchestra and quiet solo passages that displayed individual versatility. Solos in the cello, bassoon, and flute were artfully presented around overlapping accompaniments. The trumpet solo in the Bix Beiderbecke homage section was loose, jazzy, and improvisational, and together with the trombone, marimba, and trap set effectively alluded to bygone days.

Near the end, the players managed the highly syncopated accumulating riff with excitement and momentum. The orchestra’s intense acceleration ratcheted up the musical chaos, beautifully setting up the unmistakable entrance of the “Rock Island Line” song in the trombones. It was, at once, both a delightful and stunning musical effect that brought Bancks’ artistic concept into clear focus.

And the audience got it. Its reaction was an immediate and observable connection to Bancks’ music. Listeners’ faces lit up as they identified various parts of the piece – the train and river sections, the hint of Bix. Audience members smiled at the brief jazzy backbeat and bobbed their heads in recognition of the familiar “Rock Island Line” song motives. At its conclusion, with shouts of “Bravo,” whistles, and a sustained standing ovation, Smith invited Bancks out of his seat in the audience and up onto the stage for a solo bow.

The second half of the concert was another high point as the orchestra demonstrated its considerable strength for broad and persuasive lyrical expression that brought the Brahms symphony into full musical bloom.

From the opening notes, the horns’ first statement of the theme was well-formed, slowly flexing over the arching melody. The following entrances of the woodwinds were balanced and robustly full of resonant sound. The second theme in the first violins was carefully measured out with increasing intensity, carrying the flow of musical inevitably to the episodic outburst of first-theme fragments. Here, the cross-rhythms (called hemiola) were distinctly emphasized – almost segmented – and uniformly played. The transitional trombone chorales between sections of the movement were velvety and breathy in tone, swelling and fading without exaggeration.

In the slow second movement, the cellos were robust and intense in their opening soli,

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sustaining the energy of their long melodic line radiantly through the climax of their phrase until the violins took over the theme. A soft horn solo was followed by pairs of oboes and flutes in imitation, all carefully shaped.

The third movement “*grazioso*” was buoyant in the woodwinds, and the strings made secure transitions in and out of the sudden tempo change to “*presto*.”

The last movement was explosive in its dynamic contrasts from quietly meandering string melodies to sudden, pile-driving “*fortissimo*” entrances from the rest of the orchestra. The brass and timpani provided strong rhythmic emphasis that supported lively scale passages in the strings. Dovetailing clarinet arpeggios were artfully connected with a flourish, and the brilliant closing D-major chord in the trombones brought the symphony to a rousing end.

The lyrical characteristics of this Brahms symphony depend on an elastic rhythmic pulse and slowly developing dynamic drama to create tension in its interweaving, sinuous musical dialogue. But Beethoven’s raw, direct message is hammered into you with sudden changes in volume and uniform articulations at rigid tempos. And it was the lack of rhythmic uniformity – a fight between Smith’s tempos and the orchestra’s inability to consistently maintain them – that pulled the Beethoven apart.

It took 40 measures in the first movement for the string section to decide how fast it was going to play Beethoven’s “*allegro vivace e con brio*.” Alternating from a vigorous tutti, with everyone playing, to sudden pairs of quiet woodwinds, the tempo changed with the dynamics instead of continuing unabated. The upper string players, playing off-the-string arpeggios, rushed through the eighth notes, throwing off the entrances of those who joined in at the top. Staccato notes that changed from loud “*sforzando*” to soft “*dolce*” were not together, as though the players were swimming through the notes trying to find each other. When the exposition was repeated and the tempo had slowed slightly, the players fell into a rhythmic groove that brought the music into better alignment.

This intermittent failure to hold the music together exacerbated other issues.

The distinctions between specific dynamic changes were blurred. In the second movement, the extreme changes from “*fortississimo*” to “*pianissimo*” and then suddenly to “*sforzando*” drifted

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toward a general feeling of “forte” instead of creating the anomalous dynamic contrasts that are a distinguishing characteristic of this symphony.

In the last movement, the tempo seemed to push the players over the edge. With imprecise, sudden changes in dynamics and a rushing wind section, the triplets in the violins became, at times, indeterminate tremolos.

While the problem-plagued performance of Beethoven would have diminished a program solely composed of standard repertoire, it ultimately made little difference in *this* concert – dominated by the lyric swagger of Brahms and the sterling performance of a mature yet joyous debut from a Quad Cities composer.

Bancks’ *Rock Island Line* is rigorous, dense, serious art music, but it has a beating heart and a playful spirit. And the Quad City Symphony did justice to his tonal complexity and time-honored fusion of simple folk tunes into a larger symphonic ensemble and form. Smith and the orchestra deftly conveyed both the composer’s sophistication and his winks; Bancks was just having fun with it, and the audience did, too.

If you recognize the sounds of a train or a river or elements of jazz, *Rock Island Line* will not only speak to you but take you on a thrilling musical ride. It visibly and rightly resonated with the audience.

*The Quad City Symphony final Masterworks concerts of the season will be held on Saturday, April 5, at the Adler Theatre and Sunday, April 6, at Augustana College’s Centennial Hall. The program features Mahler’s Symphony No. 3 and mezzo-soprano Adriana Zabala. For more information, visit [QCSymphony.com](http://QCSymphony.com).*

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