

Honest Symphony Concert Sparkles with Awe-Inspiring Watershed

Written by Zach Carstensen

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Enchanted with the ideals of the French Revolution, Beethoven originally dedicated his third symphony to Napoleon Bonaparte. But when Napoleon declared himself emperor, Beethoven tore up the title page and renamed the symphony the “Heroic symphony, to celebrate the memory of great man. ”

Despite the criticism that the third symphony was “unendurable,” “lawless,” and “inordinately lengthy,” the piece marks a watershed point in classical music generally and Beethoven in particular. Each movement steps in the direction of a new paradigm for music.

On February 3, the Quad City Symphony Orchestra (QCSO) delved into the moving beauty of that third symphony, Mozart’s *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, and Ravel’s inspired *Piano Concerto in G Major*

Conductor Donald Schleicher started the concert with Mozart’s famous *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (A Little Night Music

). The piece is insistent in its lightness, and Mozart might be displeased that it is probably his most famous today.

Yet the music is completely Mozart, a good representative of his composition style. The emotion is neutral and the harmony uncomplicated, and gems are interspersed within the larger composition. Irony pervades the first movement with its military-march feel, and the second-movement romance tells us where Mozart thought business really ought to be done.

Because of the piece’s fame, it is unfair to expect conductors and orchestras to discover more in the music; it really should be played. And despite a few rough parts, the QCSO and Schleicher presented Mozart for what he was: a creative and compositional genius.

The second piece of the evening was assisted by acclaimed pianist Anton Nel. Ravel’s *Piano Concerto in G Major*

is unmistakably the composer’s own. The opening movement mixes Spanish and jazz influences, and the effect is enchanting; the section seems to combine Ravel’s *Bolero*

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and

Rapsodie Espagnole

, and even Gershwin's

Rhapsody in Blue

. Only after the harp suggests it does the piano lunge into a cadenza leading to the movement's firm conclusion.

The truth of the piano is fully expressed in the second movement. Opening with a long melody, followed by the flutes, woodwinds, and horn, the piece builds, emotionally engaging the players.

In the final movement, Ravel finishes swiftly, at times referring back to the influences of the first movement, and the thump of the drum that ended the first section also concludes the third.

Nel didn't have the most difficult technical task before him, but he did have an expressive challenge. Ravel is said to have combined Saint Saens and Mozart in the concerto, and this coupling is difficult because of the need to match brilliance with the profound and to be able to move seamlessly along the extremes. Nel did this well.

Within minutes of languishing in the insightful second movement, he darted into the upbeat finale as if the middle movement had never existed. Even after the optimistic first movement, Nel let his exuberant playing disappear as he slid effortlessly into the three-minute piano melody at the start of the adagio.

Concluding the concert was Beethoven's third symphony, a revelatory experience. It is classical in its construction but romantic in intent, a fence-sitter musically but bold in its depth and breadth.

The first movement is essentially a byproduct of Mozart and Haydn.

It isn't until the second movement, the funeral march, that the symphony becomes truly revolutionary. The oboe cries out in mournful sorrow while the strings symbolically drum behind it. Grand in scope, Beethoven unabashedly shifts between tones and constructions. Building the movement, Beethoven utilizes counterpoint to infuse an edge-of-the-seat intensity as it builds toward climax.

The sublime music of the movement is unparalleled. Schleicher opened the movement up in a way that everyone in attendance could appreciate by giving us a guided tour of the mind of Beethoven.

The funeral march leads into the frenetic scherzo. Buzzing with coiled energy, and coming off a moving predecessor, the third movement should probably have ended the symphony. But the piece concludes with a classic theme and variation that borrows from Beethoven's ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*

. It's not the best way Beethoven could have ended, but the movement is interesting in its development, a departure from previous compositions.

What made the QCSO's and Schleicher's performance exceptional was that they did not try to

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turn the music on its head and discover a new way to look at the piece. They relied on Beethoven to show us the emotional truth of the music, not on the interpretation of the conductor or individual players.

For diversity, there has been no better concert this season. With German light music, Ravel's hybrid French style, and Beethoven's awe-inspiring piece, there was something for everyone. The concert was not filled with loud showpieces, but it provided an emotionally honest evening with tremendous music to boot.