

Symphony Warhorses Save “Sardine Sandwich” Finale

Written by Zach Carstensen
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Looking back at the 2001-2 season of the Quad City Symphony Orchestra (QCSO), it is fair to say there were some good concerts but more mediocre-to-bad shows. April’s concert last weekend fell squarely into the latter category; like a sardine sandwich, the ends of the concert were adequate while the middle smelled and tasted funny.

The season ended with a hodgepodge experience of Sibelius, Mozart, and Richard Strauss. A strange blend of nationalistic Finnish music, Mozart opera, and Strauss opera was made worse by guest soloists from the University of Illinois, who limply sang (in English no less) the finale to Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*.

Fortunately, the warhorses of the orchestra – Alan Ohmes (violin), Charles Wendt (cello), Michael Fee (French horn), and Molly Paccione (clarinet) – performed brilliantly and inspired the orchestra with their individual technical brilliance.

Also notable, given a lack of consistency in the past, was the brass section generally and the horns specifically. With demanding brass pitfalls in both Sibelius’ *Four Legends* and Strauss’ *Der Rosenkavalier* suite, the QCSO brass performed lucidly.

Though there was no apparent context or linking theme connecting the three segments of last Saturday’s concert, the individual pieces are quite extraordinary and alone worthy of performance. Taken together, though, it seemed as if QCSO Musical Director and Conductor Donald Schleicher was trying to force a square peg into a round hole.

Jean Sibelius’ *Four Legends*, for example, was the lead-in for a concert featuring operatic vocal and orchestral works.

Drawing on desolate Finnish influences, Sibelius’ music is characterized by its sometimes mountainous feel and its often programmatic character. Mythology and regional atmospheric sounds abound in his *Four Legends Opus 22*.

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In the piece, Sibelius traces the exploits of Lemminkainen, the hero of Finland’s national epic *Kalevala*

. The first movement describes the hero’s quest for a wife, the second Lemminkainen’s journey to kill the Swan of Tounela with a single arrow. The remaining two movements chart the hero’s journey in the underworld after he is killed, and his journey home.

All four movements highlight the expertise of a number of the QCSO’s most consistent musicians. My personal favorite was Charles Wendt and his solo in the third movement. Wendt’s playing was solemn and uplifting, offering hope that our hero might return to life. His solo built off an earlier performance by Principal Horn Michael Fee. It was the inspired solo performances that made the *Four Legends* so enjoyable.

After the intermission, the concert fell apart, hastened by lackluster performances by members of the University of Illinois Opera Theatre.

Most of the performance problems lay less with individual ability and dedication than the frail youth of their voices; even with the truncated orchestra, the soloists were consumed by Mozart’s accompanying accent music. Chad Ballantyne, performing Figaro, was notable for his exceptional listlessness and cardboard-like performance. When the courtiers rushed on stage, their collective voices didn’t help; they actually made matters worse at times, sounding disjointed and confused.

After a disappointing middle, Richard Strauss’ lush, captivating suite from *Der Rosenkavalier* and the QCSO’s commendable playing could not re-ignite my interest in the concert.

So where does the QCSO go from here? After two good years under Schleicher, the orchestra was bound to hit a wall sooner or later. This season was that wall. Mixed all year, the season was strongest in the under-attended Chamber Music Series.

Adding to the problems, this year’s soloists were inconsistent. Camellia Johnson started things out right with a powerful performance of Tichelli’s *An American Dream*. Robert Chen added a boring rendition of Barber’s

Violin Concerto

. Regrettably, the best soloist and concert were victims of the March 2 snowstorm.

Even though April’s season closer was mixed, it matched the tenor of the season well. I would have preferred if Schleicher had buried April’s concert in the middle of the season so it would be easier to forget. Instead, a bitter taste is left that I hope doesn’t follow me into May and the summer.