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A Toronto Symphony Strauss to stir the soul

von John Terauds, 28. September 2019

Symphony concerts are only predictable on paper. It's the moment the music starts, even if it is a piece everyone has heard and played dozens of times before, that the magic of the moment gets a chance to take over.

Friday night's Toronto Symphony Orchestra program at Roy Thomson Hall was less predictable than usual on paper and turned into something quite special over the evening.

Rather than placing the concerto — the piece with the starry soloist — at the start of the program, the TSO reversed the usual order, starting with the "Symphony No. 3" (from 1883) by Johannes Brahms. And rather than explore the four-movement composition's darker side, as so many conductors do, visiting Scottish maestro Donald Runnicles went out of his way to highlight the lyrical side of Brahms' imagination.

Runnicles' tempos were downright luxurious at times, spotlighting his graceful turn with phrasing and letting the music breathe. The conductor let light and air suffuse the whole score. These are qualities that are very rare in performances of anything by Brahms, whose late-Romantic sensibilities frequently tended toward shadow and density.

The composer did intend this symphony to evoke a personal motto of "free but happy," and Runnicles succeeded in shining the spotlight on both qualities with the help of an orchestra that, despite being between permanent music directors, revealed itself to be in magnificent form.

The woodwind section has been a long-standing strength of the TSO and they didn't disappoint on Friday night. This was especially true after intermission, when we heard two pieces by Richard Strauss — one from early in his long career, more or less contemporary with Brahms' symphony, and one written at the end of the Second World War, in the twilight of his life.

Instead of an imported soloist, the star of Strauss's "Concerto in D Major for Oboe and Small Orchestra" was the TSO's own principal oboe, Sarah Jeffrey. Strauss wickedly leaves no room for the poor soloist to breathe in a succession of melodic curlicues. But Jeffrey seemed to possess endless streams of breath as she shaped the music in this delicate confection.

Inspired by a request from an American oboist-turned-soldier in 1945, this is by far not Strauss's best work, being thin on thematic material. It is, however, a great showcase for an oboist's artistry. It also proved to be yet one more opportunity for Runnicles to fill the orchestral textures with sweetly perfumed air.

The evening ended with Strauss's breathtaking tone poem, "Death and Transfiguration" from 1889. Runnicles and the full-sized orchestra fully captured the transformative magic of the music. When the imaginary protagonist-artist's heartbeat stops, the music loses all sense of time and momentum as it floats toward an ethereal end. The musicians and their leader cast the spell and kept the audience in rapt silence right until the end.

Soul-stirring moments such as these are what keep us coming back for more, whether or not the program is predictable.