

Review: Ioannides and Ott inspire with premier performance of ‘Fire Mountain’

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“Mountain and Sea” was not just a concert by Symphony Tacoma — it was a culmination of creativity, education, outreach and advocacy that touched our community and brought people together in a powerful shared experience.

The centerpiece and emotional pinnacle of the evening was the world premiere of “Fire Mountain” by Daniel Ott. “Fire Mountain” is a powerful blend of orchestra, chorus, and film, combining to evoke images and messages about the power and fragility of Mount Rainier. The piece was inspired by the power of Mount Rainier and how climate change is affecting it.

Ott’s composition is a dramatic blend of contrasting soundscapes: epic and intimate, embracing and overpowering, chaotic and pure. In the pre-concert mixer, Ioannides described the composition as a “complex web of terrain,” a fitting description of the music and a thoughtful metaphor to Mount Rainier.

Ott’s work opens with the hushed sounds of blowing wind created by the Symphony Tacoma Voices from the sides of the auditorium, then strings added to this effect. This soundscape cast an immediate spell on the audience. The complex web of sounds Ott pulls from the orchestra include several aleatoric (music without a beat) passages — where musicians are asked to improvise

within specific directions. Through this technique, Ott creates tapestries of sound, sometimes glistening and other times violent. Because of the improvised nature of this technique, no performance will ever be exactly the same. Post concert, Mount Rainier National Park Deputy Superintendent Tracy Swartout commented on how honestly the aleatoric music represented the mountain. She mentioned that depending on where you are, what the weather is and who you are with, you experience the mountain differently. The music matched this organic experience perfectly.

“Fire Mountain” is not an abstract modern music experiment. Ott’s work was easily understood through chant-like melodies, exciting rhythmic counterpoint and captivating orchestration. I found myself continuously taken by the palette of colors and effects Ott was able to draw out of the orchestra. The sliding and smearing trombones gave personality to the melting ice and post eruption mudslides. The hushed closing violin textures painted images of icy calm.

Derek Klein’s film added significantly to the meaning of the music. The abstract images from Mount Rainier were set against and superimposed atop molten glass hot-shop scenes. The majesty and intricacy of Rainier were juxtaposed with the power, fire and fragility of the glass art. On one level, it was symbolic of the evidence of climate change the mountain is experiencing. On another level, the film showcased many things Tacomans love: Mount Rainier, glass art, nature, our city. Although the sounds of “Fire Mountain” were engaging enough, the film added a concrete focus and message to the experience.

“Fire Mountain” ended in an elongated, disintegrating diminuendo. The violin sections melted into a single thread of sound, and their whisper faded into profound silence. This silence clung on for a long time. It seemed that nobody in the Pantages Theater wanted this moment to end. The silence broke, and the audience launched into an immediate standing ovation.

Familiar and favorite symphonic works flanked the concert: Grieg’s Peer Gynt Suite, Mussorgsky’s music from Khovanshchina, and Debussy’s epic La Mer. They showed off the orchestra’s abilities to handle such well known symphonic music. Highlights included many solos by principal woodwinds. Mary Jensen (flute), Craig Rine (principal clarinet) and Selina Greso (principal oboe) stood out as soloists. They, and many of their peers, played with captivating musicianship.

The encore at the end of the concert was a touching tribute to retiring principal horn Richard Reed. Ravel’s Pavane for a Dead Princess is a well known, intimate and lyrical work, and it was special to hear Richard play the solos with such dedication. Reed is a valuable member of the Tacoma music community, and the admiration from his colleagues was obvious as the concert concluded.

A review of just the Symphony Tacoma performance cannot do justice to the depth and profound effect the “Fire Mountain” collaboration has had on the Tacoma community. Was it a great concert? Absolutely. Bravo to Symphony Tacoma, Sarah Ioannides, Daniel Ott, and everyone behind the massive and inclusive project. But the larger lesson goes beyond a single concert event. “Fire Mountain” has given us a glimpse at the creative and collaborative potential in Tacoma.