

Symphony Tacoma Rises to Beethoven's Sun

By [Rosemary Ponnekanti](#) | May 15, 2019



Dane Gregory Meyer
Photo by Karjaka Studios

It's a tall order to write a piece of music to pair with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. But that's exactly the order [Symphony Tacoma](#) director Sarah Ioannides made of composer Hannah Lash for the season finale last weekend — and Lash filled the request with music both fresh and timeless.

Commissioning new work has become part of the Tacoma orchestra's identity since Ioannides, a British conductor hailed as one of the best on Lebrecht's "Women Conductors: The Power List," took the helm nearly five years ago.

On Saturday night in the Pantages Theater, however, the music was not only new, but quietly turned the historic male composer archetype on its head. Lash isn't just a woman, she's also a professional harpist — an instrument traditionally dominated by women, and the polar opposite to Beethoven's blustery, piano-percussive modality.

Lash also lives in the 21st century and is both acutely aware of our very contemporary challenges (an infinity of light-speed information, a post-post-modern worldview) and has the vision to rise above them.

Yet to speak to Beethoven's mammoth, iconic Ninth is still daunting. All of this, then, was in play when the upper strings began a delicate waterfall of cascading dotted notes in the world premiere opening of Lash's "In Hopes of Finding the Sun."

With quiet revolution, Lash took Beethoven's own dotted-note violin lines and turned them backwards: the original short upbeat, long downbeat was now reversed into something more lacy, legato and endless. Building the texture with marching timpani, ominous brass and diffident woodwinds, Lash plays with a tonality that's part neo-Romantic English, part early-American dissonance, with a delightfully minor ambiguity that's perfect for our point in time.

Over all this came the choir: Symphony Tacoma Chorus, sounding occasionally messy and fragile but mostly solid in their post-modern bursts of chordal recitative that prefigured that famous cello/bass and baritone solo in the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth.

The biggest downside was the chorus articulation, too weak to convey Lash's beautiful poetry. A haiku-like summary of the fire motif in Schiller's "Ode to Joy", it describes the ineffable joy of soaring, dancing and being consumed by a burning sun — at once a metaphor of life, death and unity with the universe.

After 20 minutes of this ethereal, intriguing emotion, Beethoven's fierce declamations came as the kind of shock they probably were to his 1824 audience. Yet Lash's voice enabled us to listen for the lighter, more complex moments in the Beethoven — a woman finding the feminine (and the harpist) in this most masculine of artistic hierarchies: classical music.

Symphony Tacoma, under Ioannides' assured baton, rose to Beethoven's sun with energy, passion and a full, rich sound that filled the sold-out theater. In the first movement, firm brass chords resonated against the renovated theater's new shell,

violins crisp and timpani exciting, with Ioannides guiding the music like a ship's captain over stormy waves.

The *Molto vivace* was just that, fast and light, the lacy airiness of the triplets interrupted by stomping timpani like a giant among elves. Legato strings, a precise bassoon and expressive oboe led to an ending with flair.

The third movement is a love song, and Ioannides made it flow rather than funereal with long, arching phrases and the triplet section as intimate as a slow waltz. The 5th horn solo was particularly poignant, sounding as if played offstage.

And then, of course, the finale that everybody waits for: sonorous cello/bass recitative, thoughtful phrases, wistful violins, triumphant brass. Ioannides wove through the tempo changes with precision and grace, and the orchestra followed flawlessly.

The quartet of soloists made a perfect balance of voices: Baritone Charles Robert Stephens warm and personable, tenor Ross Hauck brilliant, mezzo Melissa Plagemann and soprano Kristin Vogel glittery as sunlight on top.

Symphony Tacoma Chorus filled the hall with a dynamic, strong sound, and as the notes flew to their shining destinations, it was as if every question in Hannah Lash's piece had been answered.

More about Symphony Tacoma [here](#).

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