

Symphony Tacoma is fantastic with ‘Symphonie Fantastique’

By **Dave Davison** -
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Piano virtuoso Henry Kramer, in conjunction with the orchestra, played a dynamic performance of Sergei Prokofiev’s Piano Concerto No. 2 at Symphony Tacoma’s Nov. 17 concert at the Pantages Theater.

Tacoma, you’ve come a long way, baby. Maybe you really are the City of Destiny. I recall the 1970s and 80s when you had to be a brave soul to venture into downtown Tacoma after dark. Pacific Avenue was like a scene of the zombie apocalypse, with hardly anyone on the streets except for the denizens of beer-sodden bars or seedy joints that showed adult films.

A comparison with today is striking. Last Saturday I traveled downtown to catch Symphony Tacoma’s second performance of the season. The area has become so crowded in the evening that I ended up driving all over the place looking for a free parking spot. I finally found one, a number of blocks away from the Pantages Theater. Downtown Tacoma is now a thriving, popular destination for all kinds

of folks looking to enjoy a variety of nightlife. It is good to see so many souls eager to partake of the cultural offerings made available in our civic environment.

The newly remodeled Pantages was mobbed by well-dressed symphony fans who were lined up at the ticket windows eager to procure their seats for the night's musical experience. After navigating through the crowds of people, one enters into the grand hall of the theater. The elaborate, tastefully painted ornamentation and architectural flourishes make every audience member feel like royalty. It is as if we were all attending an exclusive event at the heart of a monarch's sumptuous palace. Yet, this is a hall for all the people of Tacoma.

People were visiting peacefully with one another until the house lights went down and a hush descended. After applause for Symphony Tacoma conductor Sarah Ioannides, the music soon began.

The first item on the docket for the evening was a performance of Emmanuel Chabrier's 1883 "España." The piece begins with some plucky pizzicato by the string section before plunging into an exotic wonderland of flighty flutes and brazen brass. Castanets are often on hand to lend a Spanish flavor to the piece. "España" struck a chord with me because it was one of the compositions on a Boston Pops

album that I played over and over as a small child. The beautifully played work was just an appetizer, however.

Next came a mesmerizing performance of Sergei Prokofiev's 1923 Piano Concerto No. 2, featuring guest piano virtuoso Henry Kramer. Kramer was the winner of the Julliard School's William Petschek Recital Debut Award in 2015 and has been featured on stages the world over. For this performance, I felt myself fortunate to have been assigned what others might have considered a bad seat: down near the front and off to one side, so that I could not see much of the orchestra. It did however, allow me to have a great vantage when it came to watching Kramer's hands as he performed musical marvels on the grand piano.

The first movement of the piano concerto starts off on tippy toes but quickly takes a deep plunge into some rich sonic territory with a dialogue between the stings and the piano. The piano plays long, solo passages that are sometimes loose, languid and spacey before they build up to a manic frenzy. At one point, the entire orchestra has to come in with one powerful blast that has to be perfectly in sync with the wild piano. With Ioannides at the helm, Symphony Tacoma pulled the feat off flawlessly.

After a short and zesty second movement, the concerto continued with the low brass barging in like a team of elephants. The music formed a

series of sonic pulses that would subside so that the piano could meditation and drift before the next surge came on. Kramer's playing is a study of precision, tempo variation and expressive sensitivity. I counted myself fortunate to have been assigned such a "poor" seat.

After the intermission came the evening's main course, the title piece of the concert: "Symphonie Fantastique," which was composed in 1830 by the French composer Hector Berlioz. A prime example of programmatic music, in which music is used to tell a preconceived narrative, "Symphonie Fantastique" is meant to be a romantic and macabre depiction in music of a young artist's erotic infatuation and opium poisoning. Leonard Bernstein called it "an expedition into psychedelia because of its hallucinatory and dream-like nature."

In the first movement, called "Passions," the main theme is introduced. This musical theme is meant as the appearance of a woman with whom the hero becomes obsessed.

The second movement, "A Ball," depicts a scene of elegant dancers whirling to the music of a grand ball (the regal interior of the Pantages makes this scene easy to imagine).

Things get interesting with the third movement, "Scene in the Country," in which the hero wanders the countryside lost in his emotions, which burst to the surface every time he thinks of the

woman of his dreams. Oboes play the music of shepherds in the pastoral setting. Kettle drums form the rolling thunder of a storm that is coming just as the hero tries to poison himself with opium.

The fourth movement is the foreboding "March to the Scaffold," in which the hero of the tale is lost in a drug-induced stupor and is troubled by nightmares that he has killed the woman of his dreams and is taken away to be hanged. During the ponderous march, there are bursts of brass and burly bassoons. The music grows to grandiose proportions until the sound of snare drums signal that the hanging is taking place.

The final movement is a wild ride through a netherworld: "Dream of a Witches' Sabbath." The hero is now privy to a profane gathering of fell beings. His beloved appears among the witches who mock him. Woodwinds create a twiggy tableau while low instruments play a rolling tone and the flutes soar overhead like malevolent sprites. The recurrent theme of the beloved is now comical and mocking. At times the music is whipped up into a sonic whirlwind. Tubas and church chimes engage in a dialogue. At other moments, the violins bounce their bows on the stings to create a skeletal sound.

Through it all, Ioannides used her whole frame to channel the music on the page and to conduct it to the musicians of the orchestra. Her body, her hands and her facial expressions were constantly in motion,

as she transmitted the music to the musicians who in turn brought it to life with their various skills.

Symphony Tacoma performs their concerts with professional confidence that is duly appreciated by the audience, expressed in multiple standing ovations. It is always a thing of value to experience great music played by great musicians.

Symphony Tacoma's next concert is just around the corner. A whole sequence of holiday music will commence with the "Sounds of the Season" concert, which will be performed at the Pantages on Dec. 2.

For more information, visit symphonytacoma.org.