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Review: NBSO offers evening of education, exultation

As I stepped from the Zeiterion lobby into the street after the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra concert Feb. 20, I had the impression of having been "to school" and "to church" on the same evening, and that both places had left me in a nourished and fulfilled state of being.

The education phase at 6:30 p.m. was the informal pre-concert lecture by Maestro David MacKenzie and his Yale University compatriot, cellist Carter Brey, principle cellist of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Dr. MacKenzie gave a brief but lucid overview of the music in store. He described the concert as a "Schumann Sandwich" – the intimate chamber music-like Concerto for Cello in A Minor set between two bold orchestral pieces, both of which have a dramatic narrative story line: Benjamin Britten's "Four Sea Interludes" from "Peter Grimes" and Modest Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition." He credited us with being familiar with the "Pictures," but reminded us to note how the "Promenade" evolved from scene to scene as the composer was affected by each successive painting. Tennyson's words came to mind – those put into the mouth of the great Ulysses: "I am a part of all that I have met."

We were next given an overview of the "Sea Interludes," which are a reworking of music from the tragic opera "Peter Grimes," set in an English fishing village. When premiered in 1945, it was first considered "unplayable" by the original players, who later became very fond of the ingeniously inventive and sonorous orchestration. The maestro prepared us to appreciate in turn "The Sunrise," "A Sunday Morning," "The Moonlight" and "The Storm." He noted that this choice of seagoing repertoire was made with New Bedford's history in mind.

Next our guest soloist spoke to us of the troubled inner life of Robert Schumann ("bipolar, bisexual, and seriously messed up") despite, or because of which, he could portray the human existential condition with such profundity. Using sample passages from the concerto, Brey gave us a foretaste of the musical glory to come.

Then he introduced us to "Ex-Gerardi," his magnificent cello built in northern Italy in 1748 by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini, tracing its provenance from Milan, through various owners into his hands in 1984 from the estate of a cellist who had played in the MGM orchestra. He quipped, "Maybe you've never heard me play, but you have unknowingly heard my cello in the sound track of 'Singin' in the Rain'." He added, "It's a fine instrument, one which I could not afford to buy today."

The master cellist (whose other interests include marathon running and sailing) impressed us all as a tall, thin, gracious, soft-spoken man whom one would not tire of knowing.

Then it was 7:30 and time for The Exultation. I had taken copious notes during the lecture, but decided to just sit and listen to the concert, following the advice of one of my musical mentors, "If it's memorable, you'll remember it." Well, it was and I will, but the profusion of praise cannot be contained in one review. Still, I'll try.

The "Sea Interludes" began as I had imagined from Maestro MacKenzie's description of "an ethereal melody from the high strings, seemingly borne on the wind," followed by a "churning of waves from the woodwinds" and "a hymn-like choir of brass." It was a somewhat ominous "Sunrise," fit for opening a tragic day in the opera. I might have missed the novelty of church bells being portrayed by the brass instruments, had I not been prepared for it in the lecture. The chimes did sound their voices on other judicious occasions, once with an urgent peal of repeated tones. "The Moonlight" movement was not as peaceful as one might imagine, for reasons known to the composer and the necessity of the drama. Finally, "The Storm" rumbled through the hall in such fury as to outdo Rossini's or even Beethoven's orchestral storms. Even maestro commented to the audience at the end of piece, "Now that was a proper storm!" I call it instrumental virtuosity on the part of our hometown players performed at a level of excellence to match orchestras in cities 20 times the size of New Bedford.

As the stage hands reset the stage for our guest soloist, I pondered on the merit of a tri-partite program, especially one so balanced and well contrasted as this one. Then our gentle cellist strode onto the stage and seated himself on a small raised podium. A short sequence of orchestral chords announced a flowing and lyrical passage, so songlike and full of the pathos one can also hear in Schumann's lieder. He was a poster child of the Romantic Age which exulted in the haunted sense of yearning for the ideal natural state. Add to this the torment of the composer's psyche and one can rightly wonder that such a piece of music could come into being.

I marveled at how one instrument, especially one in the baritone range, could "play a duet" with a full orchestra. It was artfully achieved by the composer's skill, the conductor's control, the players' restraint and the soloist's dynamic projection. During passages when the orchestra played alone, Brey would frequently hold the cello upright away from his body as if to deflect honor from himself to the instrument maker. The final movement marked "sehr lebhaft" (very lively) delivered a mind-boggling display of virtuosity by the composer, the orchestra, and Brey. The almost-full house responded with unrestrained applause. Our soloist wisely did not play an encore before the second intermission, but graciously moved to the back row of cellists to play along with the orchestra in part three. It was the first time I had seen such a remarkably cooperative spirit on the part of a guest artist.

Then came the "Pictures at an Exhibition" introduced so confidently by a solo trumpet. The audience was now on more familiar ground and was drawn by sound to "see" a memorable set of paintings well loved by Mussorgsky. The word "synesthesia" comes to mind – the rare neural crossover phenomenon possessed by a minority of the population who can literally "see sounds" and "hear in color." But it was magic of another kind – the skill to find structural corollaries between sights and sounds so as to tell a story or paint a picture.

The general public, I am told, finds this style of "classical music" the easiest to take in. For me this performance of "Pictures at an Exhibition" was the most vivid and exhilarating I have ever experienced. "The Gnome," "The Castle," "The Oxcart," "The Market," "The Dancing Chicks," "The Two Old Men," "The Catacombs," etc., all appeared vividly to my mind's eye. If all my vinyl and disk recordings of this piece suddenly disappeared, I would be well nurtured by the memory of this night. The spell climaxed for me as the antics of the witch Baba Yaga surged and merged into "The Great Gate of Kiev." There were goosebumps and a few tears of exultation as the evening drew to a thunderous conclusion. But not before several dramatic silences during which the audience was so silent that I could hear my heart beat.

It all seemed too good for applause. If only Maurice Ravel, who transformed "Pictures at an Exhibition" from a piano solo into this magnificent orchestration, could have been on hand for a bow.

Before making our exit I had to step up onto the stage and give Brey one more handshake of thanks for his astonishing contribution. Then while walking to the exit, I remarked to my wife Helga that if a genii gave me three wishes at this moment, they would be: 1) that all the invisible instrument makers whose handiwork was brought to life this evening could have magically stood for a round of applause; 2) that all of the current presidential candidates could be made to sit in silence for 90 minutes and listen to the NBSO, and 3) that the last two concerts with Maestro Mackenzie before he retires from the NBSO will be completely sold out.