

October 25, 2010

Violinist Dale Barltrop does Schumann proud in Vancouver

By Lloyd Dykk



At the Orpheum Theatre on Saturday, October 23. Continues October 25

It took nerve for the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra to program Robert Schumann's *Violin Concerto in D Minor*, a work almost nobody plays. Saturday was only the second time we'd heard it in Vancouver.

Despite Schumann's name as a classic romantic, this isn't too amazing since the concerto has long been seen as a repertory pariah. Written three years before the composer's death in 1856, it's acquired the reputation of being a product of clinical depression. For many years, it lay undisturbed, and when it was finally published in 1937 there was a huge to-do, accompanied by séances at which the violinist Jelly d'Arányi, who later debuted it, claimed to have been in contact with Schumann's ghost. Yehudi Menuhin, too, included it in his repertoire for a while and recorded it in the 1930s.

Otherwise, very few people have looked at it.

Frankly, it is not very good. But although an odour of failure pervades it, anything from this tragic period in Schumann's life would have to be interesting. The concerto, which is more symphony than solo, is mainly notable for its strange and piercingly sad slow movement with an exquisite opening theme that Schumann, in the first onslaught of madness, thought had come from angels. But the concerto has flashes of inspiration elsewhere and other moments that are beautiful.

It was an odd and technically taxing choice for [Australian-born Dale Barltrop](#), the VSO's new concertmaster, but he's a wonderfully sensitive violinist and one worthy of mention in the same breath as Gerald Jarvis, the orchestra's late and greatly missed first violin.

Like Jarvis, Barltrop plays with heart and is a very honest musician. He deserved his standing ovation.

The man on the podium, German-born conductor Günther Herbig, was worthy too. He showed a real feeling for the Schumann and especially for the long major work on the program, Dmitri Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 10*, which is often considered the finest of his 15.

Shostakovich was cryptic when speaking about the symphony, saying it was whatever people heard in it. Written just after the death of his persecutor, Joseph Stalin, it's taken by some to be positive, though Shostakovich wasn't naive enough to believe things would change that much in a dictatorship.

The performance under Herbig was nothing less than brilliant in drawing out the main characteristics of the symphony, with two movements boisterous and satiric, the other two of a drill-like intensity. As a friend said, it takes an Eastern European to understand Shostakovich.

And who was that blond violinist modestly seated in the back row of the violin section? Dale Barltrop.