

VSO takes an exciting, risky journey in symphonic music

Haydn and Mahler join Canadian premiere of John Adams' Dr. Atomic Symphony, a reworking of materials from his 2005 opera

By David Gordon Duke

Listeners who prefer their concert fare predictable and their guest artists gilt-edged were no doubt out in full last Monday for an all-Beethoven program with violinist Pinchas Zukerman.

On the other hand, the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's Saturday performance at the Orpheum was an exciting, even risky exploration of symphonic music in three radically different musical styles, minus the distraction of a soloist.

First up was Haydn's Clock Symphony, vintage repertoire targeted for specifically English tastes at the end of the 18th century.

Bramwell Tovey got a fine classical sound out of a significantly reduced ensemble, which consistently brought out Haydn's unique combination of invention, novelty, and elegance.

Upper strings were especially crisp and disciplined; playing from the winds was conspiratorially taut.

Next on the program was the Adagio from Mahler's unfinished (and perhaps unfinishable) Tenth Symphony - exhausting, technically exacting music that skates to the very edge of atonality.

Although the performance wasn't entirely flawless, the hyper-emotional late-Mahler feel was honest and deeply impressive, qualities that augur well for the forthcoming performance of Das Lied von der Erde at the end of the season.

While the Mahler would have been treat enough for any normal concert, there was even more on offer: The Canadian premiere of John Adams' Dr. Atomic Symphony, an instruments-only reworking of materials from his 2005 opera about Robert Oppenheimer.

The rejigged materials form a completely satisfying three movement symphony. The short fanfare introduction, a longish scherzo and a more poetic conclusion show all the Adams' hallmarks: Fresh, sometimes frenetic rhythms that casually evoke vernacular American idioms; minimalistic passage work; and an astonishing flair for orchestral colour.

The work is big and occasionally brash, but there is also a pensive intensity, especially in the lonely trumpet solo that heralds a concluding chaconne.

Once, patrons would have avoided the premiere of a contemporary, full-length symphony like the plague. Today, Adams' music has unique drawing power; listeners go out of their way to hear what he's up to.

His powerful new work was well served by Bramwell Tovey and a very hard-working VSO.

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