

Vancouver Symphony Orchestra delivers dreamy Germanic program

By Lloyd Dykk

Conducted by Kenneth Slowik. At the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts on Friday, May 20. No remaining performances

The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra gave a highly Germanic program at the Chan on Friday night—and if that sounds thick and stodgy, it was anything but.

The works, all of them lovely, were by Johann Sebastian Bach, Franz Joseph Haydn, and Robert Schumann. They were, respectively, the *Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D Major*, the “Surprise” Symphony, and the graceful “Spring” Symphony, all conducted by a notable American name, Kenneth Slowik, who has early-music connections. For once there was no real concerto on the program, that is unless you consider the *Brandenburg 5* to be a kind of proto-keyboard concerto, and it has considerable solo parts for violin and flute as well.

Another thing about the concert was that all the musicians—except for Slowik, who doubled as the harpsichordist in the *Brandenburg*—were in-house. The violinist was the VSO’s assistant concertmaster Joan Blackman, and the flutist was Christie Reside, a principal player.

There were only eight musicians, which gave the score maximum transparency, and the music had no trouble surviving the danger of being so exposed. Blackman and Reside played angelically and Slowik made his solo everything it should be: that is, fleet and virtuosic.

Because he wrote so much other music that is just as inventive and funny, the “surprise” of Haydn’s *Symphony No. 94 in G Major* is of minimal importance but always worth looking forward to. It’s named after the fortissimo chord that crashes into the pianissimo repetition of a staccato theme which introduces the second movement, and it was designed to wake up the ladies in the audience. It’s still funny, and typical of an endearing and witty composer whose formidable reputation as “Papa” Haydn was and is a serious libel.

This was far from the image of him that the VSO and Slowik projected. They made him sound as fresh as a new coat of paint.

And just when it looked likely that we were in for a nuclear May, as just about all of March and April were, spring suddenly happened—a happy coincidence for the timing of Schumann’s *Symphony No. 1 in B Flat*. The “Spring” symphony is the happiest, most songful of the four that Schumann produced, and this performance was bliss, catching all that defines it as a prime example of romanticism, from the brass fanfare that sets it in motion to the slow movement, which is one of the most perfect things in music.

It was dreamy, and it should have been recorded.

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