

## **Review: National Broadcast Orchestra, VSO shine in separate showcases**

By David Gordon Duke

Vancouver listeners — and radio listeners nationwide — can share some optimism that reports of the demise of the CBC Radio Orchestra will prove premature. In its new avatar as the National Broadcast Orchestra, the ensemble played a gala benefit concert (with services of the artists donated) at the Chan Centre Friday. This official *début* became a striking affirmation of the importance of the ensemble to Canadian music; it also tacitly acknowledged the new political reality of cultural responsibilities being downloaded to the private sector by announcing the first NBO corporate sponsor, Montreal's Stingray Digital Group.

Conductor Alain Trudel began the evening with a crisp interpretation of Prokofiev's Classical Symphony that persuasively demonstrated the NBO's potential as an agile chamber orchestra. Veteran pianist Anton Kuerti then joined the group in his recreation of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 0, written when the composer was just thirteen. Frankly, the work is only a curiosity; Kuerti's commitment to the piece proved more endearing than the music itself. Even so, this is exactly the sort of project that is part of the orchestra's mandate, and exactly the sort of proposition that makes sense for broadcast or internet diffusion rather than regular concert presentation.

Trumpet soloist Jens Lindemann was featured in two crowd-pleasing showcases. For an orchestra that can sight-read complicated scores at the drop of a hat, Maestro Trudel's *Preach* was child's play, but an ingratiating work-out. Edmonton-based Allan Gilliland's *Kalla* is glossy, perhaps even a bit glib, but offers enough bluesy poetry to provide worthwhile, if undemanding, listening.

Both works were overshadowed by Michael Oesterle's new "classical" symphony, *The Sparrow's Ledger*, a NBO commission funded by CBC Radio. Unusually for a composer born in the late 1960s, Oesterle's work is deeply Stravinskian, redolent of the Russian master's pre-World War II neoclassicism. This is a compliment, not a criticism: Oesterle's crystalline textures, enigmatic sense of line, and contrapuntal flair make this a distinguished addition to the Canadian symphonic repertoire—the sort of work that would never see the light of day without a national ensemble committed to the music of our own composers.

Circumstances allowed me to hear the Vancouver Symphony the following evening. Comparison turns out to be the wrong idea entirely: the juxtaposition of the two events demonstrated why Vancouver needs both ensembles, and laid to rest the thought that the NBO and VSO are in any way competitors.

The first half of Saturday's VSO "Masterworks Gold" program at the Orpheum was devoted to works that demand the forces of a large modern orchestra. The concert began with Wagner's exquisite "Prelude" to *Lohengrin*, given a sensitive reading by guest conductor Andreas Delfs, currently of the Milwaukee Symphony.

The main draw was Lilya Zilberstein in Rachmaninov's ultra-popular Third Piano Concerto. Zilberstein began with a touch of coolness and intimacy, but quickly exhibited more than requisite glitter and technique to make the piece sound. Intensity and drama accrued as the somewhat discursive concerto unfolded. Clearly thought-out pacing effectively created a long, smoldering arc; Rachmaninov's poetry and passion built to an entirely satisfying conclusion, with soloist and conductor in a very complementary partnership.

Mozart's Jupiter Symphony ended the evening. The rise of historically informed period-instrument ensembles can make modern orchestral readings of Mozart sound stodgy. Delfs' approach had the clarity and drive to match any period ensemble. He and a slightly reduced number of VSO musicians delivered a bright, lively, and nuanced reading of Mozart's tremendous score—a persuasively stylish demonstration of the orchestra's versatility and merit.

The VSO program repeats at the Orpheum on Monday evening, 8 pm. The NBO program will be broadcast by CBC Radio 2 on January 17, 11:00 a.m.

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