



## CONCERT REVIEW

# Symphony shines in anniversary program

### our take

Beethoven would be proud of how the Virginia Symphony Orchestra has grown in its 90 years.

By Lee Teply  
 Correspondent

#### NEWPORT NEWS

As the audience gathered Friday evening in the Ferguson Center for the Arts, there was an audible sense of excitement. Some of the buzz was about the impending snowstorm, but most was about the event that would fill the hall to capacity – the 90th-anniversary concert of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra.

While the musicians onstage were perfecting the tricky spots of the concert's opening work, the orchestra's story was told with both facts and faces on a screen above. The moment mixed the sense of history, of goals achieved and challenges overcome, with anticipation both for the evening's program and for the season ahead, details of which were announced by music director JoAnn Falletta.

The formalities out of the way, the orchestra got down to business with an impressive performance of Benjamin Britten's "Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra."

This may have been intended as an educational tool for children, but it is a substantial piece of music, and not all that easy.

Though the strings play mostly in sections, nearly every other person on stage is featured in solos and small ensembles. Here, the Virginia Symphony's depth of talent, built over many years, was proudly displayed.

More interesting than the obvious technical skill was the character each musician gave to the part. Some of that came from Britten's writing, but much was added by these performers, as if they were each putting their signature on the piece. In an age when the big orchestras sound more similar than distinctive, it was good to have such personality in the playing.

The final section, a large fugue, had some control issues, with some loss of precision. But the spirited contrapuntal dialogue pulled together for a strong finish.

Periodic performances of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, so welcomed by audiences, are a good measure of both an orchestra's growth and a conductor's interpretive understanding. The symphony now sounds comfortable throughout, even with the third movement's tricky tempo changes and the representation of chaos in the finale.

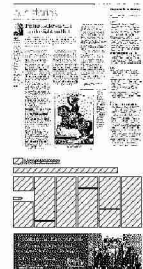
Falletta also approaches

the piece with more assurance, choosing quick tempos for the first two movements. Clear attacks and articulation gave a sense of purpose. There was a danger of becoming breathless, when opportunities for cadential nuances were passed by, but this seemed to increase the energy level.

It was difficult for the musicians to settle down to a calmer pace for the third movement, as if they had not come to an agreement on how to play it. There were no obvious problems, but it lacked a broad, steady pulse that could shape the musical discourse.

Drama came back in full force in the finale. So, too, did a clear interpretation of the large musical structure. After the solid orchestral preliminaries and presentation of the familiar theme, the voices took over, though one sometimes could not get away from the fine playing going on beneath them.

Of the four soloists, baritone Kevin Deas and tenor Yeghishe Manucharyan were particularly strong, with fine diction and sense of rhythm. Soprano Cristina Nassif and mezzo-soprano Jeniece Golbourne added their warm voices to complete the quartet.



The Virginia Symphony Chorus, which brought back some past members for the occasion, was very well prepared by Robert Shoup. With clear tone, solid chords and rhythmically lively counterpoint, these singers had the impact Beethoven intended in his historic expansion of the symphonic concept.

If Beethoven was then suggesting expanding possibilities for the orchestra, in our day the Virginia Symphony Orchestra continues to realize those possibilities and explore others with ever-increasing musical assurance and commitment.

**Lee Teply**, lteply@odu.edu

---

### **at the venue**

**What** Virginia Symphony Orchestra

**Where** Ferguson Center for the Arts, Newport News

**When** Friday evening

**Note** *The Saturday and Sunday performances of this program were postponed because of the weather, with new concert dates to be announced. Go to [www.virginiasympphony.org](http://www.virginiasympphony.org) or call (757) 892-6366.*