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SYMPHONY REVIEW

Drama, pacing help music tell its tales our take

Soloist pushes speed to enhance approach, with orchestra backing up the excitement

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In its concerts this weekend, the Virginia Symphony Orchestra explored music that tells a story. This type of music can speak quite directly to an audience, and the one Saturday evening at Chrysler Hall clearly enjoyed the musical depictions of scenes, characters and dramatic moments.

Associate conductor Matthew Kraemer led fastpaced performances, paying particular attention to the mix of instruments in the second-half pieces, which both came from the period around 1900 when increased orchestral size inspired composers to use the instruments in creative combinations.

Before that, the orchestra was reduced to its string core for an intriguing reading of Antonio Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons" that gave new life to a piece that, because it is heard so often, can be too predictable. Philippe Quint, who was the soloist in this set of four violin concertos, shared his approach with the orchestra, and together they convinced the audience of their ideas.

In the fast movements, the tempos were not always expected, and they often changed within the movement for dramatic reasons, both good things. The orchestra mostly went along with much flexibility, though there were some moments of disagreement.

Quint pushed himself to test his technique at high speed, and for the most part, he met the challenge. In very few spots, his pitch wavered, perhaps under the pressure.

With his daring approach, the drama suggested by the poetry that inspired Vivaldi had unusual impact. The fury of the summer thunderstorm, for example, put the listeners right outside in the rain, afraid of being zapped by a bolt of lightning at any moment.

The concerto's slow movements, in comparison, seemed too plain. The bit of effective ornamentation added by Quint in one movement made the others more frustrating, as one thought of the possibilities he might have added.

Using the full resources of the winds and percussion that joined the strings after intermission, the opening of Richard Strauss' 1889 tone poem "Don Juan" was huge. The orchestra filled the hall – not easy to do in Chrysler – with excitement, playing the passage boldly.

Kraemer had a convincing concept of the wandering work and moved through the sections logically. The piece has so many ideas that the calmer passages had a welcome focus on just one thing – the beauty of their instrumental combinations. With its many elements so well balanced, it was truly a first-rate performance.

The 1919 suite drawn from Igor Stravinsky's first ballet, "The Firebird" (1910), benefited from a similar approach. If it was not as successful, that was only because it seemed rushed. Instead of letting the audience savor the regularity of patterns or the angularity of syncopated rhythms, Kraemer just moved ahead.

Even the broad triumphant melody of the finale lost effect, though every note was clean. It didn't have the impact it can have with a grander vision of victory and hope.