

Symphony closes bold first season

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review

Now, the real work begins.

The Tulsa Symphony Orchestra has come an extraordinarily long way, from the moment its creation was announced in December 2005 to the final concert of its first season, which was presented Saturday night at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center.

In that time, the orchestra has grown from an ambitious dream — a unique approach to the concept of a musician-run orchestra — into a continually surprising reality.

The orchestra has accompanied Tulsa Ballet and the Tulsa Oratorio Chorus and presented a special event combining classic Warner Bros. cartoons with live music. Its members have played for the orchestras of Tulsa Opera and Light Opera Oklahoma and have performed throughout the state in small ensembles.

What's even more impressive is that the Tulsa Symphony sold out two of the five concerts that made up its regular 2006-07 season.

And, as Saturday night's concert proved, the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra has more than enough talent and determination to fulfill its artistic ambitions.

The music chosen for this concert was designed — to put it simply if a tad crudely — to let the orchestra show off, to present the sonic extremes and musical richness of a full symphony orchestra.

And we mean *FULL*. Saturday's concert was performed by a group of more than 100 musicians. (There were more photo assignments than Tulsa World photographers Saturday

evening, so you'll have to take our word for it that all those players filling the Chapman Music Hall stage was an impressive sight.)

Alastair Willis, who has held posts with the Seattle and Cincinnati symphonies and had appeared with most of the country's major orchestras, was the conductor for the evening, and his rapport with the Tulsa Symphony musicians was remarkable.

It was best shown in the quietest moment of the evening, the "Adagio for Strings" by Samuel Barber — performed this evening in honor of the late Mstislav Rostropovich, the legendary cellist and conductor who died last month.

The Adagio is a piece that sounds simple and uncomplicated, but is fiendishly difficult, because its power comes from a sense of great and tragic emotion held tightly in check. Whispers of sound build to a heartrending sob, a moment of release, then subside into quiet resignation.

It requires a great deal of skill and control to play this delicate piece well, and the Tulsa Symphony's performance of it Saturday was one of the best I've ever heard. We'll go a step further — it was perfect.

The orchestra's performance of the Adagio deserved all the "Bravos" and huzzahs that the other three pieces on the program received. But, like the music itself, the audience's response was more muted — out of respect, perhaps, or to savor for a bit longer the tender atmosphere the music created.

And the other pieces on the

program were done with equal aplomb. They included Respighi's "Church Windows," a four-movement symphonic poem, and his arrangement of Bach's "Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor."

Respighi was famous for his way of exploiting all the sonic possibilities of an orchestra, and these two pieces are textbook examples of that skill. His arrangement of the Bach piece for organ manages simultaneously to be supremely orchestral and yet still maintain the aural feel of a massive pipe organ.

"Church Windows" is more the sort of wild sonic ride one expects from this composer. These are definitely impressions of stained-glass windows seen from outside a church, rather than inside — the emphasis is on the vivid color, mosaic-like complexity and soaring architecture.

There are touches of reverence, as in the second movement, "St. Michael Archangel," with its celestial trumpet solo (played off-stage by principal Tim McFadden) and the sawing motif that underlies the final movement, "St. Gregory the Great."

But the payoff is pure adrenaline — the explosive crash of the gong at the end of the second movement, the exultant organ solo in the finale. And the Tulsa Symphony's performance accomplished exactly what Respighi wanted — it made people say, "Oh, wow!"

As did the final piece of the evening, the "Symphony No. 5" by Tchaikovsky — but for different reasons. Yes, the Tchaikovsky Fifth builds to a wonderfully triumphant finale — if the subject of this work, as some say, is Fate, then Fate is

joyously embraced as the work comes to its end.

But the symphony also helped to spotlight the abilities of many individuals in the orchestra. Principal clarinet Brad Behn had so many solos throughout the piece, beginning with the opening melody, that this piece almost seemed a concerto for clarinet and orchestra.

Principal French horn Bruce Schultz performed the hymn-like melody that opens the second movement with great skill and passion, and principal bassoon Richard Ramey gave a jaunty air to the melodies of the third movement.

Conductor Willis said early on in the evening that this concert was a celebration of the Tulsa Symphony, and he demonstrated that during the four curtain calls at the concert's end by moving to the back of the orchestra, so that no one stood between the Tulsa Symphony and its very appreciative audience.

Now: the work. The novelty of Tulsa having a new orchestra ended Saturday night. What comes now is finding out how committed Tulsa is to maintaining this orchestra — not simply to keep it in existence, but allowing it to thrive.

The commitment of the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra musicians to that goal, and to this city, is unquestionable. The commitment of Tulsa to the dream these dedicated people are working to realize needs to be just as unshakable.

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