

# Civic made Rhapsody sing

## REVIEW

**Who:** Civic Orchestra of Victoria  
Susu Robin, piano  
George Corwin, conductor

**Where:** Alix Goolden Performance Hall

**When:** Dec. 10

BY DERYK BARKER  
*Times Colonist staff*

"It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattly bang, that is so often so stimulating to a composer. ... And there I suddenly heard, and even saw on paper — the complete construction of the *Rhapsody*, from beginning to end. ... I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston I had a definite plot of the piece."

The "definite plot" perhaps, but when the Paul Whiteman band premiered *Rhapsody in Blue* on Feb. 12, 1924, George Gershwin played much of the piano solo from blank pages, nodding to Whiteman to indicate when he should bring the band in.

When Ferde Grofé, Whiteman's arranger, came to rework the original for full orchestra, he made numerous changes — gone are the banjo and celeste — but one thing he made sure to leave in was the instantly recognizable ascending clarinet glissando at the start of the work, even though this was the contribution of neither the composer nor Grofé himself; clarinetist Ross Gorman had played Gershwin's original 17-note rising passage that way as a joke during a long and trying rehearsal.

On Saturday night pianist Susu Robin joined the Civic Orchestra and conductor George Corwin for the freshest, most involving performance of the *Rhapsody* that I have heard in years.

Robin's playing was marvellous: she resolutely refused even to acknowledge the possibility of sentimentalising the music, choosing generally fast tempos with plenty of rubato, which Corwin and his players followed meticulously.

The accompaniment — although on occasion it overwhelmed the piano — was generally excellent as well, with some first-class solo work from the various wind and brass principals. Even in its symphonic arrangement, *Rhapsody in Blue* can, it seems, still sound like jazz.

Invidious though it may be, I must mention the sterling contributions of clarinetist Doug Hawley, who invested that opening glissando with a suitably louche feel, and trumpeter Craig Pedersen. Simply put, this performance swung.

Edward MacDowell's 'Indian' Suite is predicated on his notion that the only real national American music would be based upon themes of the native peoples.

While several of the melodies and rhythms had a distinctly First Nations feel to them, it was unarguably filtered through European-trained sensibilities.

Which should not undermine MacDowell's achievement — the score contains some wonderful music — or the Civic's for coping very well with its numerous technical challenges, from the dramatic horn call of the opening to the pounding rhythms of the finale.

The evening's two Broadway selections were, of course, far more familiar, even though some of the songs went by so fast one could have easily have missed them: *Oklahoma's The Farmer and the Cowman*, for instance, did not even make it as far as "Territory folks should stick together" before being subsumed into "People will say we're in love." (And I don't know whether or not to be embarrassed at knowing all the words to a musical written before I was born.)

It was a similar story with *West Side Story* — "the best *Romeo and Juliet* this side of Shakespeare" as Corwin put it; the music was played with such verve and life that one simply wanted it to last longer.

Aaron Copland's music for *Our Town* is not one of his best-known scores, perhaps because of its lack of an immediately memorable tune. It provided a gentle and atmospheric opening to an evening more notable for its fireworks.

T-C  
Mon. Dec  
12, 2005