

REVIEW

Civic performs Tchaikovsky delightfully

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CONCERT

Who: Civic Orchestra of Victoria
Hollas Longton, violin
George Corwin, conductor
Where: Alix Goolden Hall
When: Dec. 14, 2002

Tchaikovsky's first three numbered symphonies have never been as popular as the last three. The usual explanation — that they are youthful works, full of melody but rough at the edges — holds water, but barely: personally, I find any of numbers one to three melodically, formally and in every other way preferable to the Fifth.

The Symphony No. 1, for instance, with which the Civic Orchestra closed Saturday's concert, certainly fits the mild opprobrium directed at it; yes, it is structurally ramshackle in places; and, yes, there are undoubtedly elements of bombast, particularly in the finale. But, to echo George Corwin's spoken introduction, for all its faults I love it dearly and was delighted to hear such a committed performance.

The work is technically challenging and there were moments when the wisdom of tackling it seemed in some doubt, but these were brief moments and any

doubts in my mind were soon set aside by the sheer exuberance of the playing.

I shall touch on just a few of the many high points: the inimitably Tchaikovskian flute and bassoon melody in the introduction; the strings at the opening of the second movement, which had a solidity (and accuracy) the Civic of a few years back could only have dreamed of; Sheila Longton's plaintive oboe melody in the same movement; the dancing waltz trio of the third movement; and the exultation of the finale.

As ever, Corwin — a musician for whom my respect and admiration continue to grow unabated — directed a performance which, by sticking to the letter of the score, brought us closer to the

music than many a more "interventionist" conductor.

Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* is a work so horribly familiar today — in supermarkets, elevators and other fine listening venues — that the prospect of hearing yet another performance tends to pall very quickly.

To say, then, that Hollas Longton and the Civic's performance of *Autumn* and *Winter* gripped the attention from start to finish is intended as the highest praise.

Despite looking as if a stiff winter wind might actually blow him away, Longton proved to be a dazzling soloist, tossing off Vivaldi's virtuosic passage-work with ease, and showing the more lyrical side to his immense talent in the *cantilena* slow movement of *Winter*.

The accompaniment, by what one might call the Civic Chamber Orchestra — a mere sixteen strings as opposed to the full complement of 38 — was worthy of the soloist: rhythms were crisp, pointed and wonderfully precise, while the chilly introduction to *Winter* almost made me reach for my coat. I must also

pay tribute to the splendid continuo contributions of Sally Clarkson (cello) and Tony Booker (keyboards).

A standing ovation greeted the performance and, although Longton looked almost taken aback at the enthusiasm of his reception, it was entirely justified.

The orchestra opened the concert with a fine performance of the prelude to Humperdinck's *Hansel und Gretel*, which opened with a fine horn quartet and featured some unusually secure playing above the stave from the violins.

A final word: one should not go to hear the Civic anticipating playing such as you would expect from Berlin Philharmonic, or even the Victoria Symphony. This is an amateur orchestra (although a number of the players are former professionals) who give freely of their time and energies because they love the music. That love comes through and, for me, will always outweigh any technical deficiencies.

There is, as Gustav Mahler once observed, more to music than is contained in the notes.