

Cameron led the way in VSO's 'wow' opening performance

John Shulson – September 26, 2018

While the opening program of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra's season Friday in the Ferguson Center, classified it as "Pictures at an Exhibition," by far the work that captured the attention of the audience and the evening was guest violinist Sandy Cameron in a work written for her by Danny Elfman. Elfman is acclaimed as the composer of scores for such television programs and films as "The Simpsons," "Nightmare before Christmas," "Batman," "Good Will Hunting," and "Pee-Wee's Playhouse," not to mention other such notables as Cirque du Soleil and Twyla Tharp.

On somewhat of a dare while at a program featuring music he wrote for Tim Burton films, in which Cameron played the cadenza from "Edward Scissorhands," he set out to write a violin concerto, Concerto for Violin and Orchestra — Eleven Eleven. He chose Cameron as his muse and reportedly she asked that the piece be challenging. It is.

Cameron debuted the work last June at the Prague Proms, only right since it was co-commissioned by the Czech and Royal Scottish National Symphony Orchestras and Stanford Live. Inspired by the Shostakovich Violin Concerto No. 1, Elfman's concerto is dramatic, lyrical, highly rhythmic, percussive (especially given its unusual cadenza-like back and forth between the violin and percussion), thoughtful and playful. The score is high adrenaline business, taking us on a musical roller coaster ride from the heights to the sudden-drop depth of emotions.

Although three of the four movements were obviously of different style or frenetic form, the "Fantasma" was anything but. Here things were noticeably calmer and quieter, an interesting and engaging blend of things romantic and mournful. It was captivating, even haunting in its depth of feeling.

Overall, the work features lots of fantastically and devilishly wicked virtuoso playing for the soloist and moments of lyricism set against a big-screen-type symphonic score that was big, bold, rhythmic and downright challenging in its own right.

The enthusiastically and internationally acclaimed Cameron, dressed in something akin to a sleek, colorful Catwoman outfit, delivered an amazing performance. There was hardly a moment in the 40-some-minute piece that she wasn't moving, at times on her silver-slipped tippy toes, at times crouching and springing up and down, roaming back and forth in her performance space, even once twirling around in a little dance, articulating every measure. And when she occasionally looked into the audience, there was something musically seductive about it. The physical and emotional energy she put into the work was downright compelling, exciting and extraordinary.

The reception given her — and JoAnn Falletta and orchestra which were exemplary -- was wild and crazy and prolonged, of the sort found at sports events. No question about electricity in the air.

The program opened with a fine reading of the Brahms Academic Festival Overture which was a fresh listening experience, given that it's greatly over exposed in concert halls and on classical radio stations. Similarly is Mussorgsky's "Pictures." However, subtle Falletta touches here and there brought a renewed sense of appreciation of it, bolstered by the orchestra's simply splendid performance of its 10 main movements.

The VSO embraced the colorful nature of the piece, moving through its segments with delicacy, lyricism, playfulness, and power, the latter, most impressively heard in the "Hut on Fowl's Leg" leading into the blockbuster "Great Gate of Kiev," which sent the audience into justifiably explosive cheers. All in all, a "wow" opening event.

Shulson, a Williamsburg resident, has been covering the arts for over 40 years. He makes a guest appearance in Margaret Truman's "Murder at the Opera."

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