

BSO Delivers Superb Concert In New, Stark Setting

Written by Win Pusey—Special to The Ellsworth American

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BANGOR — The Bangor Symphony Orchestra returned to its traditional venue on Sunday for the third concert of its 113th season. At the helm was guest conductor Lucas Richman, presently music director of the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra.

That traditional venue, formerly the Maine Center for the Arts, has been renamed the Collins Center for the Arts in honor of major donors, Richard R. and Anne A. Collins. Extensive renovations have taken place and the ambience is quite different. With the addition of visual art in the new lobby and gathering spaces it will take on its own personality, one purportedly more 21st century. At this time, however, it is a bit of a shock to come in the cold, white expanse of a Maine winter to the cold, white expanse of the new facade. When the grass is green and the flowers bloom, it may seem more welcoming.

On to the music. No contemporary stuff here. Beethoven and Brahms were played to the old red seats, still there, with extraordinary skill and warmth, beginning with Beethoven's "Overture to the Consecration of the House, Op. 124." His masterpiece of piano concerto writing, Op. 73 (Emperor), No. 5 in E-flat Major, followed, and the afternoon ended with Brahms' "Symphony No. 4 in E Minor, Op. 98."

Some overall impressions of the concert apply to each of the compositions performed. First, the conductor, Richman, had a wonderfully steady beat, easy to follow and without histrionics. One might think that would be dull, but it had the effect of melding the players without stifling them. The professionalism of each musician lies in the fact that he or she understands the score, reads the language of the composer and has the training to interpret it. Richman seemed to respect that and the orchestra responded accordingly. His particular forte, however, was apparent in the rhythmic precision of all the "short notes;" the dotted eighths and sixteenths; the pickups; the antiphonal bursts. He also had marvelous control of the dynamics, crucial to the nature of Beethoven.

Joel Fan, the soloist for the "Emperor Concerto," should have a halo of superlatives around his head. A slight, courteous man, he sat at the piano as quietly as at a desk and proceeded to give vibrant, passionate, tender, sparkling life to the thousands of notes under his fingers. Each melodic theme seemed to grow throughout the modulatory transitions into full bloom as an organic whole. His playing of the second movement opening theme in a reverent, pianissimo whisper was one of those times when one wished the music would never end. It also spoke well for the improved acoustics of the hall. The piano was in a 'sweet spot,' that place where projection is the very best it can be. As if this weren't enough, the jubilant third movement bought the audience back to reality and the enjoyment of pyrotechnics. Fans responded to the standing ovation with an encore, Franz Liszt's piano transcription of Verdi's "Quartet from Rigoletto: Bella Figlia dell'amore." Add to his accolades a stunning technique, huge sound and fiery temperament.

The orchestral accompaniment for the Concerto deserves appreciation. This ensemble has always been good in that role, but it was especially so this time. Balance was excellent, phrasing well nuanced and solo passages admirable.

Johannes Brahms' fourth symphony, his last, is a prodigious work. It begins abruptly with the first theme in the strings, a deceptively simple tune. Richman brought it forward with an almost 'dipping' sound, very intriguing. In fact, many of the entrances led to flowering at the top of the phrase. The question-answer episodes were also played with conversational understanding.

The second movement, after more than the usual pause between these parts, gave the third and fourth horns time to get in the water, so to speak. Once in, they swam beautifully. So did the woodwinds and the cello solo came off with a rich mature sound. The third movement, visually

notable for Cindy Bastide's delicate triangle part, is a bear to play because of all the afterbeats. They came off just fine leading to a good horn quartet passage and rousing ending. In the final movement, entrances were clear and cutoffs snappy. Susan Heath's flute solo and the trombone trio, in fact the whole brass section, sounded full and round. The lengthened reverberation time of the stage may have had something to do with that.

The concert opener, "Beethoven's Overture to the Consecration of the House," was better than some of the overtures of past programs. The opening brass, above galloping bassoons, revved up the day and there was a nice, tidy transition into the double fugue. Enough said.

A final thought. Maybe the orchestra members could wear bright colors instead of the black, which now blends into the cave-like charcoal stage. It would be so much more pleasant to watch.