

- Dan Savoie, Special to the Mercury
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Guelph Symphony closes season with spirited performance



The Guelph Symphony Orchestra closed its season with a spirited performance Sunday at the River Run Centre.

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REVIEW

It's amazing what four notes of music can do. For more than 200 years, those leading notes from Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 have captivated audiences around the world – and Sunday's performance by the Guelph Symphony Orchestra was no different.

Despite being a younger company, the GSO closed its 2012/2013 season at the River Run Centre with the warmth and feeling of a group much more seasoned. It performed the epic symphony masterfully for a capacity crowd of members, season ticket holders and curious guests.

The first half of the performance featured a nouveau piece sandwiched between two classics. Opening with a lively interpretation of the overture from the opera Hansel and Gretel, the orchestra quickly merged into an original Odawa First Nations composition and concluded with a fantastic version of Tchaikovsky's Variations On A Rococo Theme to compliment soloist William McLeish's passionate cello.

The prelude to Hansel and Gretel was a great choice to start the performance, with its combination of playful, soft and dramatic tones. Its use of the entire orchestra helped prepare everyone for the more experimental piece that followed.

Midwewe'igan, or Sound Of The Drum, from Odawa First Nation composer Barbara Croall is not a typical symphonic selection and needed the good ol' familiarity of Hansel and Gretel to help ease the audience into it.

Combining traditional call and response hand drumming, First Nations singing and native flutes with a full symphony orchestra is something new. It provided Croall with a unique way to express the sounds of two loons singing to each other from across an echoing lake. In it, the symphony oddly served as the background, providing a soundtrack of whispering winds, heartbeats and forest noises as Croall and her partner Rod Nettagog used their voices, hand



drums and flutes to sing the loon calls. It was nowhere near a traditional listening experience and required a bit of open-mindedness, but once the formalities were over, the call of the loons became evident and enjoyable.

The first half ended with the highlight of the entire show – a stunning performance from solo cellist William McLeish, who was as enjoyable to watch as he was to listen to. McLeish was the winner of the 2012 GSO Under-23 Concerto Competition and his skills quickly became evident in just the first theme alone.

Variations On A Rococo Theme was a good showcase piece for such a vibrant performer. One of the challenges of this composition is that the cellist must stay close to the high register using a thumb for most of the performance – and they have to do it no breaks between themes. McLeish didn't seem uncomfortable or stressed at any point, he actually made it look rather easy.

Tchaikovsky wrote the composition with numerous themes that invoke both skill and passion and McLeish was a perfect candidate for the challenge. There were times where his motions and expressions were just as breathtaking as the music. At one point he looked as if he was ready to burst in tears as he watched the notes flow from his strings into the air above. It's rare to see such emotion and skill from a musician as young as McLeish, but for this performance, his age was unimportant. It was all about getting lost in his journey as the notes left his strings and made their way around the auditorium.

The second half of the afternoon show was taken up with a full performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which is recognized as one of the best known pieces of classical music ever written. Those familiar four notes – short, short, short, long – is a great choice for music lovers of all ages and tastes. It's a musical motif that has found its way into film, television and even pop, rock and metal music.

The orchestra benefitted greatly from the superb acoustics of the River Run Centre, giving the performance a full sound. The four movements seemed to showcase the GSO 2012/2013 theme of "music in motion" as the composition progressed from the familiar opening to the triumphant ending.

It was also a great piece for GSO artistic director and conductor Judith Yan, who seemed to come to life while leading the orchestra through the classic composition. It was fun to watch her visible gestures shape the sound of the music as she guided the musicians for more than 30 minutes. At one point Yan actually lifted up from the ground for a brief second as she persuaded one of the stronger notes.

With this performance, and the closing of her second season as artistic director with the GSO, Yan is quickly earning her title as Guelph's Kapellmeister and the orchestra is growing in leaps and bounds.

Dan Savoie is a Guelph-based arts journalist.