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Guelph Symphony Orchestra delivers in New Year's Day concert

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By Dan Savoie

REVIEW

The Guelph Symphony Orchestra kicked off 2014 with a Vienna themed concert at the River Run Centre on New Year's Day with a two-act repertoire loaded with Viennese waltzes, polkas, arias and duets. This show –the third in a six-concert season – was a little more romantic and down to earth than the first two shows of the season.

Vienna is known by most as the city of dreams. Its musical heritage glows with names like Ludwig van Beethoven, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Franz Liszt and the Strauss family and its mystique is almost as large as the music that those legends created. The orchestra provided a small sample from those great composers with selections from the Straus family, Mozart, Franz Lehár, Richard Wagner and Rudolf Siczynski.

With a scaled-down version of the symphony on stage, the pieces seemed more personal and intimate this time out, while allowing for some moments of freedom and local expression. The performance included vocal solos, duets and glimpses of impressive ballroom dancing. Although the open space allowed room for the big waves of dancing, it felt a bit empty without a full orchestra and choir on stage which highlighted the first two concerts in 2013.

However, the GSO brought the best of The Imperial City to The Royal City with an impressive selection of the Vienna Philharmonic-influenced selections that included some of the more famous pieces to come from Austria. The show featured stellar guest soloists Betty Allison (soprano) and Neil Craighead (bass baritone) with flashy ballroom dancers Ronen Cherniavski and Alexandra Sevastianova. Allison's voice was piercing when she hit the high notes and Craighead's theatrical gestures brought the pompous Don Giovanni to life.

While the first concerts of the season shined with huge chorus pieces, the smaller dance selections of the Vienna show gave the orchestra's percussion a chance to really shine for the first time this year. Beginning with the not-so-subtle banging and clanging of Straus II's Thunder and Lightning, it was obvious how important the drum sounds would be for this concert. They also

had a chance to glow in the busy and humourous Tritsch-Tratsch Polka and Straus senior's Radetzky March, which also included a fun and somewhat comedic round of interactive clapping with the audience similar to when Herbert Von Karajan conducted both the Vienna Philharmonic and his audience in the 1980s.

The Radetzky March was even more special as an excited Ken Kosow took to the stage as a guest conductor. Kosow won a silent auction at the opening of the season for a chance to conduct the performance and was joined with Katharine Bando on a marching drum, who also won a similar opportunity to be a percussionist for a day with a different silent auction. Kosow received some advice from GSO conductor Judith Yan and Bando received some coaching from the GSO's percussion section and both held their own during the fun performance. During the song, Yan was removed from the stage and proceeded to conduct the audience from within the seats in a manner similar to the classic Karajan Vienna Philharmonic performances.

With similarities to the Vienna Philharmonic evident at the end, it became crystal clear that the GSO was attempting, and succeeded, to bring the magic and mystery of Vienna to the cold winter of Guelph. The orchestra continues to bring world-class music to the city and presenting it the way it was meant to be heard –live in concert.

The Guelph Symphony Orchestra returns to the River Run Centre on Feb. 23 with a slightly tougher performance when they tackle Gustav Holst's The Planets.

Dan Savoie is a Guelph journalist and performing arts reviewer.