

Buffalo Phil: Premieres Without Pain

Tyberg Symphony, Hagen Concerto

Herman Trotter

The Buffalo Philharmonic's 75th anniversary season (Mar/Apr 2011) has been a festive one where Music Director JoAnn Falletta opened brilliantly with Midori in Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto, followed by Elgar's Cello Concerto in Lynn Harrell's heart-warming performance, an electrifying Concerto for Orchestra by Lutoslawski, a spectacular *Planets* by Holst with projections of each planet, and Verdi's Requiem to conclude the season. But what left the most indelible memories in my mind was Falletta's quite remarkable feat of presenting, in consecutive programs, premieres of a significant symphony rediscovered and a new violin concerto that did not cost the orchestra a nickel.

Here's how: regular readers of ARG know that for several years Falletta and the BPO have been at the center of the emergence from total obscurity of works by Vienna-born composer Marcel Tyberg, who was put to death at Auschwitz on December 31, 1944, despite being a practicing Catholic with only 1/16th Jewish ancestry. His entire life's work, however, had been entrusted to the family of one of his composition students, Enrico Mihich, who eventually moved to Buffalo and became a world-renowned cancer researcher, all the while safeguarding Tyberg's scores in his attic.

When he shared this trove with JoAnn Falletta, it marked the beginning of Tyberg's emergence. She led the world premiere of his Symphony No. 3 (1943) in 2008 and recorded it for Naxos (Nov/Dec 2010). For the 75th anniversary Falletta chose to unveil his Symphony No. 2 (1931) on April 30.

Tyberg was by nature introverted and retiring, desperately concerned with composing but quite oblivious to any need to have his music published or even performed. After conductor Rafael Kubelik, a friend of the Tyberg family, saw his Symphony No. 2, he performed it in Prague sometime in the early 1930s with the Czech Philharmonic. Shortly before Kubelik died, he confirmed to Mihich that it was the world premiere, but any printed trace of the performance seems to have been obliterated by World War II. The BPO's performances constituted the Western hemisphere premiere, and the music fully justified Kubelik's high opinion of it.

Tyberg was a no-nonsense composer. His musical ideas are cogent, often absorbing, and

are developed with a clear sense of logic that leads the listener, almost effortlessly, to their conclusion. Once Tyberg has stated his case, the music, without extraneous pomp or grandiosity, just says goodbye with a succinct, fascinating coda. This is warm, bracing music from the trailing edge of romanticism.

Symphony No. 2 is more expansive and perhaps a bit more from the heart than the more concise and pointed No. 3. The opening Allegro Appassionato speaks first in pianissimo spiccato strings, answered by brusque lower strings, and seems largely propelled by an elevated sense of ceremony. The rhythms and voicing seem pleasantly Brucknerian, and as the music unfolds there are lovely quiet connecting interludes in the winds and brassy declamations that develop into extended ruminations, capped by a quick quiet close.

The slow movement is the quintessence of its marking, "langsam". It is searchingly meditative with a mellow, pensive theme and some adventurous harmonies. It radiates a sense of purpose or direction and is guided by a strong inner voice and superbly balanced instrumental colors. A surprising descending string glissando leads to warm horn commentary and another aptly prompt conclusion.

The Scherzo has the overall feeling of a jolly, percolating piece that reaches a full boil, then signs off with a decisive flourish. It has a lilting five-note theme with a countering idea in high twittering winds, an interesting oompah effect in low winds that acts like a ground bass, and propulsive triplet rhythms that give a sense of continuous, inventive change.

The Finale is an athletic, energetic piece whose pensive prelude in warm strings leads to dramatic declamations and flourishes that break out first in a rather episodic fugal passage punctuated by unexpected pauses and later in full-fledged counterpoint that reflects Tyberg's love of the organ. It's music with a great striding tread, sweeping horn interjections, and dense orchestration that is never showy but always seems imaginative and just right. Tyberg's absolute assurance generates a toe-tapping excitement that finally yields to a quick pause, as if the orchestra were taking a deep breath before the joyous F major coda.

Falletta and the BPO seemed to project this conservative, engrossing symphony with an authority and complete conviction that sug-

gest it is well worth adding to the repertory. She speaks of Tyberg's music as belonging to the sound world of Schubert, Bruckner, and Mahler. While there is a clear allegiance to those composers, there is nothing plagiaristic in what we hear 67 years after Tyberg's death.

Viewed another way, Tyberg's output was relatively slight: four orchestral works, two each of chamber works, piano sonatas, and Masses, plus some 35 lieder. But as these works progressively emerge, they strike me as radiating a sure sense of conventional late 19th- and early 20th-Century style not too different from what listeners might experience if, say, the music of Dohnanyi, Reger, or Pfitzner had been lost and suddenly rediscovered in the 21st Century.

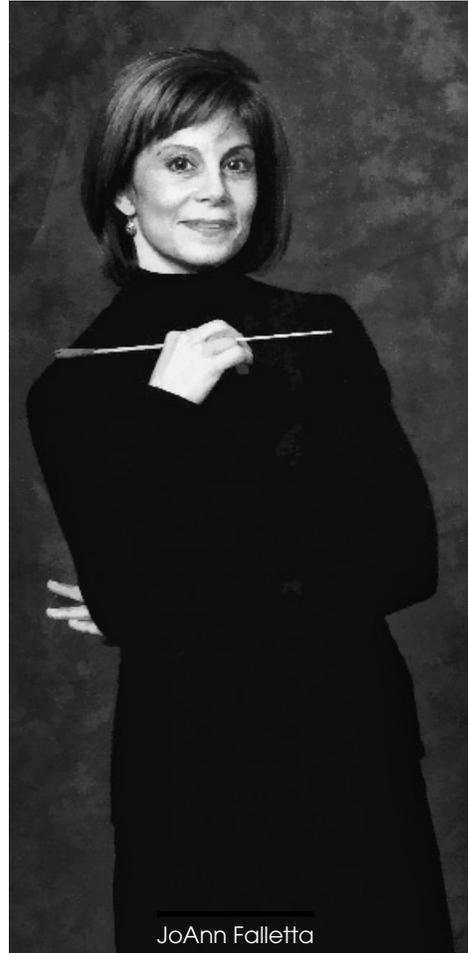
Two weeks later Falletta followed with the May 13 world premiere of a Violin Concerto by American composer Daron Hagen simply called *Songbook*, with Concertmaster Michael Ludwig as soloist. The title derives from the fact that the themes for each of the four movements were taken from two Irish and two American folk songs that Hagen's wife sang nightly to their young son at bedtime. Scored for solo violin, strings, harp, and percussion, the structure sounds complicated. The movements are listed as Variations, Chaconne, Pasticaglia, and Variations, but most of the music falls quite easily on the ear.

It opens with a plaint to the tragic 1798 Irish uprising called 'The Croppy Boy', whose heart-warming, slow, melancholy theme on the violin is far more beautiful than the subject matter might suggest. Often underscored by a marimba, the violin leads the way through nine variations that are wholly tonal with only mild dissonance, but with increasingly dense textures, gradually subsiding to the original calm.

The brief Scherzo is a delight, based on a song about the great potato famine called 'The Praties'. Here the violin, harp, and snare drum almost play tag as they skitter with great animation and captivating rhythmic pulse through the hop-skipping variations to a quick but very satisfying conclusion.

The heart of this concerto is the Pasticaglia on the American song 'Over Yandro'. Here the percussion is tacit, which helped me attend to the central importance in the overall structure. The violin limns a supplicating, reaching theme that manages to radiate both tenderness and angst over the course of the variations and their peaceful resolution.

The more complex Finale teases the listener with an extended violin solo leading to an agitated allegro where bits and pieces of the ubiquitous 'Amazing Grace' emerge, only gradually falling in place as the fully realized theme. Over restless orchestral and percussion



JoAnn Falletta

support, the variations grow in intensity and then, seemingly without preparation, just stop.

The performance seemed even more convincing on second hearing. As soloist Ludwig was absolutely secure and comfortable in the music's overall texture, which largely presented the violin as a true soloist but sometimes in more of a *concertante* role. The central movements were completely satisfying, but there were moments in the outer movements where the composer might want to reconsider some of the percussion-string balances and contrasts.

Of special note is the fact that *Songbook* was not a commissioned work but the fallout from a conversation among Ludwig, Hagen, and Falletta following the BPO's 2006 concert performance of Hagen's opera *Shining Brow* about Frank Lloyd Wright. Ludwig and Falletta in effect said "Hey, write us a violin concerto and make it tuneful." The result was *Songbook*.