

A Beethoven treat of the first order

**Vancouver Symphony Orchestra
and Vancouver Bach Choir**

Conducted by Andrew Grams

The Orpheum Theatre

In Vancouver on Saturday

REVIEWED BY

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The line to pick up tickets at box office desk for the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's performance of Beethoven's *Ninth* snaked around the block and a long way down the street well before 8 p.m. on Saturday, as if the Orpheum were a popular nightclub with a great band. The audience was still filing into the hall almost half an hour after the conductor ought to have been giving the downbeat, and many may have noted with dismay that the program included not just Beethoven's final symphony but his first symphony as well, and

his overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus*. How much Beethoven might be too much? The status of Beethoven's *Ninth* draws people to the orchestral sanctuary much as *The Messiah* does at Christmas, and, like *The Messiah*, everybody knows there's an irresistible tune at the end (described by a mid-19th century Rhode Island newspaper writer as sounding "very much like *Yankee Doodle*.") What they may not remember, however, is how long it takes to reach the *Ode to Joy*.

It took guest conductor Andrew Grams only a few bars of the overture, however, to assure us that these first pieces were not mere filler. Grams punched out the introductory chords with wonderful rhetorical acumen, a perfect start to one of the snappiest and most Mozartean interpretations of this overture I've heard, full of pointed, comic opera touches. There was nothing

perfunctory here: Even the ubiquitous V-I cadences were consistently differentiated. Some were courteous, some were tossed off like smiles, some were aimed with sharp precision, but none of them were hammered out like clichés.

Grams's interpretation of the *First Symphony* was a treat, the opening theme of the first movement lovingly stretched out, the hand-offs between sections graceful, the accents like sharp elbows into the status quo. His tempos were poised – as if he wanted to make sure the audience took nothing for granted – but they were never pompous. Tiny hesitations after the downbeat in the main theme of *andante cantabile* movement gave it an absolutely distinctive character, but here, and in the final movement, there was also a clear sense of restraint. Successive entries in the winds floated like

feathers, with no gratuitous momentum. And Grams is extremely gratifying to watch: He shows us what he wants us to notice, even as those elegant gestures ensure that what the orchestra plays is worthy of notice.

The same virtues were evident in the *Ninth*, the same abrupt, clean shifts and rhetorical punches. Grams can take a long time to build to a *forte*, but when a climax arrives, it's special. There was not the same degree of detailing in the *Ninth*. It seemed under-rehearsed, and the interpretation was more generic, although one could hear what Grams aspired to and didn't quite manage to achieve. The first movement was the most distinctive: I loved, especially, the way the context for the timpani explosions was shaped and the warmth – the humanity – Grams draws out of a melody.

The slow movement was in-

deed slow – not as slow as Leonard Bernstein's famous performance after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but considerably slower than Beethoven's indicated metronome markings and stodgy as a result. Balance also suffered here, with the string lines overshadowed by woodwind commentary.

Tenor Benjamin Butterfield was the star amongst the soloists; baritone Daniel Okulitch did some lovely singing in the ensembles, but was oddly toneless, despite much volume, in the recitative, and mezzo-soprano Rebecca Hass was covered up by Michele Capalbo's caterwauling soprano. The final movement worked its bizarre magic, nonetheless. One might happily have risen for the final statement of the *Ode to Joy*, just as one stands for the Hallelujah Chorus in *The Messiah*.

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