The New York Youth Symphony's Glorious Season Finale

Nowhere did Memorial Day weekend shine more vibrant than within the walls of Carnegie Hall, where the New York Youth Symphony performed beautifully the works by three composers at the end, peak, and start of their careers – Beethoven, Rossini, and Molly Joyce.

A Refreshing Newness

All of 23 years old, Ms. Joyce received a commission by the NYYS's First Music Program, which resulted in the thoroughly modern work, "Fresh," conducted by the orchestra's Music Director, Joshua Gersen.

The piece began with the roll of the snare drum that extended out into the cavernous hall and then snapped into an evocative syncopation, as a series of sustained singular tones engaged and followed one at a time, down and around the bass clef, deep and stern, sounding less like strings and brass than individual keys on an organ.

The concept of orchestra members taking on roles normally reserved for other instruments was a primary point of the composition. In her notes, Ms. Joyce says she was inspired by the marching band music of her youth, and conceived a work where the steady percussion was slowly replaced by other instruments, so the drummers could evolve toward expressions more expansive and "fresh."

Initially, Joyce established an atmosphere of intrigue and suspense, as more and more instruments joined in to create depth and texture, while keeping things sonorous and moody. Timbre and pitch moved up as horns and flutes summoned the phantom brass band of memory, especially the muted trumpets, which at times drifted toward the sort of thing Gil Evans could have arranged, if not Quincy Jones.

At length, the snare's driving rhythms and accents were replaced by the timpani, which grew more expressive as the violins leapt into dominance, ultimately falling into a trance-like, high-end staccato tipped with glimmering piccolos, which drew other instruments into its lockstep like a magnet, even as the drummers grew more audacious.

The Hitchcock-like build up was countered by various strains of brass or strings, but continued to grow, long and steady, louder than softer than louder again, before coming to an abrupt stop. The audience hanging there in the suddenly silent hall took a few beats before they could exhale and respond with a long and steady ovation.

Such a Carnegie Hall debut is a milestone to be cherished by a composer just breaking out into what should prove a rewarding career. But I must say I envy her not for having the world premiere of her provocative composition placed between two legendary works from two of the giants in the orchestral tradition, Gioacchino Rossini and Ludwig Van Beethoven.

Over the Top Overture

Speaking of performing under pressure, Rossini composed the overture to his melodramma La gazza larda (The Thieving Magpie,) Opera Opus 9, on the day it was to open at la Scala, May 31, 1817. But he was riding high, after a string of successes, starting with The Barber of Seville. As such, his having only a few hours to go before curtain didn't stop him from writing one of the most popular pieces of classical music from the nineteenth century. And as the opening selection of this particular concert, it was nothing short of magnificent.

Led with absolute authority and animated panache by NYYS Assistant Conductor Harrison Hollingsworth, the orchestra launched into the overture with gusto, wowing the audience with the initial pomp and splendor of the Maestoso marziale, followed by the vivacious and high-flying Allergro chase scene.

And then came the switching of gears into 3/4 time, for the dainty and whimsical tip-toe sneaking of the crafty magpie, buoyed by brass and bassoon, and topped by the giggling piccolo and the jovial clarinet, and later the oboe, with the violins having their own turn at the same theme now and again.

Certainly this is a waltz second only to Strauss's Blue Danube in sheer sensual enjoyment, before it suddenly bounds into the climactic final minute, when all swirled out to sweep up the audience in a grandiose whirlwind, cymbals crashing as the fair-haired mane of Conductor Hollingsworth flew about with each commanding slash and stab of the baton. The orchestra with him every step of the way, all was thrilling and flawless to the decisive final chord.

A triumph!

The side boxes along audience right exploded with the kind of hoots and hollers one usually hears at a rock concert, as the entire hall showered boisterous enthusiasm upon Hollingsworth and a most deserving New York Youth Symphony.

I found it interesting how, like Molly Joyce 197 years later, Rossini opened his piece with the rolling snare drum, which both composers in their own way continued to use for propulsion, and how they employed the piccolo atop warmer instrumentation for piercing clarity. Similarly, Rossini's use of the horns, piccolos and flutes were echoed in some ways during the second half of the concert, in Beethoven's magnum opus, Symphony No. 9, Op. 125.

Joyous Ode

I was worried attendance might be lacking, given the lovely weather and holiday weekend. So, I was overjoyed to find the largest crowd I had ever seen at a NYYS concert. Seats were filled to the back of the stalls, and throughout every tier above them. If they thought they'd gotten far more than their money's worth by intermission, what lay in store afterwards should resonate as a cherished remembrance for a very long time.

From the dramatic heights of the opening movement to the glory of its awesome finale, Beethoven's 9th Symphony is not only a masterpiece for its celebrated composer, it is among the greatest and most enduring works of art in the history of human civilization.

This piece represents the first time Beethoven composed a symphony with a participating chorus, as well as four vocal soloists. It was also the first time any composer had done this, since the modern definition of "symphony" was codified half a century earlier. This was the first time the NYYS performed with a full chorus in memory, joined by the New York Choral Society, with Musical Director David Hayes, and featured artists Raquel Gonzales (soprano,) Avery Amereau (mezzo-soprano,) James Knight (Tenor), and Onay Köse (bass.)

Throughout the concert's wonderful first half there was a special anticipation inspired by the five rows of empty risers behind the orchestra. This grew to a palpable excitement as some 120 chorus members filed into place after intermission, along with several additions to the orchestra. And then it all began, with the singers and most of the extra musicians held in reserve until the final fourth movement.

Like hunting horns over the horizon, the first movement begins with a deep revelry before violins and lower orchestral murmurs awaken, as if they were warming up, or like shooting stars flitting by in omen of monumental events about to unfold. And that they did, as Conductor Gersen reached out and brought forth the first titanic chords, regal and commanding, as the swollen orchestra surged into life, sending up sheer cliffs of majestic music, echoing with the roll of timpani, highlighted by soaring strings and buttressed with brassy bravado.

Various softer sections undulated between the chasms of the monumental soundscape, but always climbing up more than they descended. As the opening section reprised for the second half of the movement, it was in a much loftier alpine valley and the ascent reached that much higher, cresting at its windswept panicle over a wide vista of clarinets and flutes fluttering below, and celebratory horns that turned suddenly somber, as all built up to a finish triumphant and defiant in the face of dark thunderheads about to strike in the looming Molto vivace.

With a searing flash of two orchestral lightning strikes and a timpani thunderclap echoed by a third, the violins were off and running, leading the orchestra into the exhilarating second movement, like a cavalry of Valkyries, galloping on their storm cloud steeds across the most unusual triple-beat cadence, which must have been revolutionary for its time. It is as if Beethoven's accents or stress beats fell according to some secondary or superimposed rhythm that keeps the listener on their toes and never able to fully relax.

It was thrilling to hear live and in person, all those strings and horns driving the piece onward. I was also happily impressed by the clarity and individual personality heard from every reed, brass and flute, throughout the gentler transitional sections, and how the entire ensemble gathered into one immense host, when the timpani

sounded the start of a new leg in the race, and all were off over hill and dale at a fierce gallop. It was a thing wonderful to behold to be heard.

I always get a kick out of the fact that this symphony is dedicated to the concept and experience of joy, while the entire first two movements resound with the intensity and violence of a typhoon, as if brooding tension smashed wide open by wiping winds, thunder and lightning, and stampeding herds is how a German – or at least Beethoven – defines happiness.

I do know how this American defines "beautiful" with classical music; it is the third movement of Beethoven's 9th Symphony.

If the first movement is a trip into the crags and cliffs of high mountains, the third movement is a serene afternoon on a perfect summer's day, spent in the meadows and pastures of the lower foothills. It is all sighing breezes, romanticism, and soft, white clouds aloft in clear blue skies, until the suddenly grand fanfares, like one overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of the natural world. Again, the New York Youth Symphony embraced and embodied Conductor Gersen's tempo and interpretation to render a living performance of such a splendid work, unique in its details but oh so worthy of the material.

The fourth movement brings it all back to stormy exhilaration, with a frenetic entrance that stops abruptly and shifts focus to the ensemble of sonorous basses. The entire thing plays like a miniature symphony within a symphony, but it always returns to the main theme. Beethoven loved his basses and he did good by them here, by having them introduce one of the most evocative melodies in Western music. As the theme repeats it is taken over by different instruments, and then just about everyone on stage, before things take a turn for the dramatic as it is handed off to the bass vocalist.

Onay Köse has considerable definition and clarity in his bass voice. The words he sang were taken from a poem by Friedrich von Schiller and adapted by Beethoven. Not being a German speaker, I have never needed to know what the words meant. The use of human voices as musical instruments was more than enough to raise goosebumps, as the other featured vocalists joined Köse and then the chorus erupted in response, and everything soared to a new level of power and magnificence.

I was particularly pleased with tenor James Knight's solo, as he demonstrated the kind of masculine voice I think works best for this piece, as opposed to the more boyish timbre sometimes heard on professional recordings. Having a tenor with some muscle and depth in his voice helped to make the soprano and mezzo-soprano stand out that much more separate, pure and beautiful. Not that Raquel Gonzalez or Avery Amereau needed any help in that department.

The four vocalists were wonderfully well matched, so they sang together, and in and around each other, with each voice distinct in character, just like how Beethoven (and Gersen) used the flute, clarinet, oboe, and bassoon across many interwoven passages of the first three movements, and then added the piccolo, trombone, contrabassoon, and weightier percussion to the final movement for extended depth and complexity.

The orchestra took over for a time, before the chorus returned for the climactic final movement within the final movement, the heavenly harmonies standing out from the instruments and then melding with them to raise the roof on the place, and ultimately bring the house down after the spectacular finish.

This was Beethoven's final completed symphony, and he saved the best for last.

This was the New York Youth Symphony's final concert of the season and likely the last concert for some of its oldest members, possibly including Musical Director Joshua Gersen. It was a tremendous crowning achievement, acknowledged by the audience as the most electrifying NYYS performance in some time, certainly since I began attending their concerts.

The audience erupted for a sustained five solid minutes of deafening, hand-numbing applause and multiple curtain calls.

As for Joshua Gersen's interpretation, I do believe this is the fastest Beethoven's 9th I have ever heard, by far. Nowhere was this more obvious than the start of the second movement, when it seemed the timpani wouldn't have time to fit all the notes in between the slashing strings. But Gersen showed absolute command and confidence in his musicians, and confidence in Ayden Michael Khan's command of the timpani drums that he has manned so well in previous concerts.

Beethoven's affection for the horn allowed Todd Leighton ample opportunity to earn his ovation, as did clarinetist Andrew O'Donnell, oboist Russel Hoffman, and flautist Olivia Staton who was outstanding in the March concert as well.

The overall brisk pacing of the work helped to show off the prowess of the entire orchestra. The symphony offered nice stretches for the second violins to take center stage more than just in terms of where they sat, while the cellists in their interplay with the bassists also shown brightly, as did the additional percussion in the fourth movement.

As happy as I was for the New York Youth Symphony and the New York Choral Society to have such a fine crowd in attendance of this marvelous concert, I feel genuinely sorry for all who didn't get a chance to see it.

After such a rewarding day, I could only wish they could repeat the performance of the 9th once a year, as is done at the annual Proms concerts in London.