Allons

UL symphony delivers dazzling performance of ‘Pines of Rome,’ Shostakovich arrangements

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The University of Louisiana at Lafayette Symphony, with a guest string section, faced a full house at Ducres-Gilfrey Auditorium on Saturday, March 3, as they brought to life Ottorino Respighi’s “The Pines of Rome,” in an event that reasserted the power and beauty of orchestral arrangements and showcased talent from around the state.

Strictly defined, a “Roman holiday” can refer to one of two things: the 1953 Audrey Hepburn-Gregory Peck (Vespa) film that gave Hepburn an Academy award in her first major film performance, or a form of entertainment that entertains one group at the (sometimes bloody) discomfort of others. Classical music, in the contemporary world, captures this latter sense in the way that reluctant patrons, dragged by parents, filial obligation or their more pretentious friends, squirm and suffer like martyrs of modernity through carefully-paced arrangements that lack a proper pop hook.

It’s necessary to note, out of respect for the form and to avoid any corrective emails from the music department, that the name “classical music” as an umbrella reference for all orchestral music, is, technically, wrong. “Classical” music is a period of art-music that consists of compositions from 1750 to 1820, taking place after the Baroque period and preceding the Romantic period. However, today it serves as a reference to any arrangement that is written for and performed by an orchestral ensemble.

There is a common opinion that classical music is “boring,” and it can be. But, so can anything — like Post Malone or terrible weather. One time I grew bored during a tornado warning, when my family and I were huddled in our basement in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and I fell asleep despite my certainly impending death and consuming fear of tornadoes (installed by an early-childhood viewing of “The Wizard of Oz”). The performance from the UL Lafayette Symphony with the help of string players from around the state, was arresting, intensely illuminating and, most importantly, the opposite of boring.

A symphony is a heavily visual experience in addition to the obvious aural elements. The effect of streaming an overture on Spotify is immensely different from that of sitting in a darkened venue, with only the orchestra in the lights is one of huge intimacy, and the sight of numbers of musicians’ movements, each tied to a sound, each complementing each other is one of breathtaking effect.

Before the performance, there is nothing but the noise of small children impatiently pounding their small yet surprisingly powerful feet on the back of one’s seat and the stage gently creaking as musicians ready themselves. This breathlessness is like the small, tight silence that occurs at the top of an ocean wave, in the half-moment before it breaks. You may be familiar with the music, with the way waves crash, but you can not account for how every drop of water will act in this unique scenario. And in that moment of suspense, one sees, hears and feels the hard work of the skilled musicians, and powers of silence, quiet and loudness and how they play all with each other in a truly stirring composition.

The symphony opened with Dmitri Shostakovich’s “Festive Overture, Op. 96,” a swirling royal welcome to the crowd that packed into the hall like so many sardines. Following this was a highlight of the evening: Johannes Brahms’ “Concerto for Violin and Cello, Op. 102,” featuring Director of Orchestral Activities Michael Blaney on violin and established musical superhero Molly Goforth on cello. After a brief delay, stemming from an apparent misplacement of the sheet music for the piece, Blaney and Goforth came forth and conquered the piece with alacrity and expertise, their melodies breathlessly interplaying with each other.

These two pieces set the stage for “The Pines of Rome,” which, because of its thematic composition, is called a “tonal poem.” Tonal poems, like Claude Debussy’s “Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune,” or (I would argue) Carly Rae Jepsen’s 2015 “Emotion,” perform as a narrative or contemplation upon a theme, taking the listener on an emotional journey similar to that of a poem or novel. Respighi’s work is a meditation on, believe it or not, the coniferous vegetation surrounding Rome. In four movements, the work presents images of these trees as watchers over Roman history.

“The Pines of Rome” was performed beautifully and to great effect, with each movement flowing seamlessly into each other as a tetraptych tapestry. The performance incorporated an off-stage brass section that swelled into the finale and provided a dramatic gesture as the stage-side doors were opened.

The night’s performance was closed with two pieces featuring students from around the state, forming a guest string section. A young, blonde child waved over the heads of fellow musicians at an unseen friend in the audience.

“Irish Fantasy,” by Miriam Overholt, initially engaged by dormant Irish heritage, but it quickly lapsed into a forgettable exercise that depended on a tired “Irish” musical theme and was engaging only in its adolescent skill as the sight of violin bows made themselves as small waves lapping at a rocky beach.

The final piece, Lauren Bernosky’s “Heart of Fire,” came with a letter from the composer (read aloud by guest string player Jordan Gatlin) dedicating the piece to “those inspiring hearts” of Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. It takes more than a dedication to social activists, however, to make a piece worthwhile, and one wishes that the piece came closer to honoring the dedicatess.

The UL Lafayette Symphony will return April 19-21 with “Humperdinck: The Opera.”

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