

July 30, 2013

Concert Review: The National Youth Orchestra of Canada did a terrific job (as usual) at Koerner Hall

By Arthur Kaptainis

The National Youth Orchestra of Canada fields mostly new personnel every summer. There is nevertheless something like a recognizable NYOC sound

The National Youth Orchestra of Canada fields mostly new personnel every summer. There is nevertheless something like a recognizable NYOC sound, and it was apparent in the energetic tremolo at the start of Wagner's *Overture to The Flying Dutchman* Monday night in Koerner Hall. These young people were not only playing a great piece, they were getting into it.

This performance was bracing throughout, with clearly articulated surges in the strings. If surfaces were a tad hard and rhythms rather regular, conductor Alain Trudel evoked more colour and flexibility after the break in Britten's *Four Sea Interludes* and especially Debussy's *La Mer*. The turbulent counterpoint of the *Jeux de vagues* was superbly managed. Everything was clear, yet the maritime atmosphere was palpable.

The NYOC's politically correct practice of not naming principals in the printed program (and indeed requiring musicians to shuffle positions all night) makes it impossible to comment on individuals. Perhaps this is just as well. The 2013 edition is a true team. But I did admire the positive approach of the timpanist in the Storm movement of the Britten. This score calls for one harp, yet there were two on stage – another reflection of the orchestra's firm (if utopian) dedication to democracy.

Sibelius's *Violin Concerto* was heard before intermission, with Blake Pouliot as soloist. Even in the opening sequence this 19-year-old Torontonion established a powerful identification with the composer's windswept romantic idiom, moving assuredly from sweet lyricism to rugged determination. The slow movement had a direct-from-the-heart quality and the finale had splendid thrust.

With a confident stage presence and a contemporary wardrobe, Pouliot looks and sounds like a player who could assert himself, even in a world with a substantial inventory of star violinists. It must be said that there were mild intonation problems in the first movement. Jitters? He does not seem to be that type.

Pouliot was awarded the Michael Measures Prize, a \$15,000 prize administered by the Canada Council, in a stage ceremony, to cheers all around. The crowd included NYOC alumni and plenty of relatives, the latter clapping vigorously between movements of the Sibelius. Perhaps we can blame Pouliot. How can you sit on your hands after a first-movement coda like that?

So a terrific outing as usual, but once again I find myself tempering my commendation with the wish that Trudel would program some Mozart and Haydn to balance all the big stuff. The pedagogical value of classical-period repertoire is beyond doubt. And let us not forget that these composers also wrote some pretty good music.