

REVIEW

DSSO season ends with brilliant program

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Saturday night's season finale by the Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra was one of the most brilliant examples of thematic programming I have ever observed, although I am more inclined to "stunning" than "spectacular," as the bulletin heralded.

To proceed from J.S. Bach to David Baker was improvisational virtuosity, spread over 2½ centuries. To follow with the "Gloria" of Francis Poulenc was to blend a sense of religious intensity with jazz and improvisation. Then to add the fervor of patriotism (combined with religious devotion) from Jan Sibelius and Pyotr Tchaikovsky brought the entire tapestry into a larger-than-life focus. Symphony Hall at the Duluth Entertainment Convention Center rarely sees such a monumental conception.

Thanks to Music Director Markand Thakar and

former Executive Director Andrew Berryhill for creating this conclusion to the 2010-11 season.

Johann Sebastian Bach lived his whole life as a musical improviser — on sacred tunes, popular tunes and original tunes. That was what successful musicians did in the early 18th century. Concertmaster Erin Aldridge joined guest violinist Diane Monroe and the strings of the DSSO to breathe creative energy into all three movements of his "Concerto for Two Violins in D minor." They took turns cuing/leading the DSSO strings, so this was chamber music of the highest order. Just watching the body movement of these two artists heightened the give and take of the solo parts, giving the effect of their making it up on the spot.

Monroe came back as soloist to do just that. Renowned Indiana-based jazz composer David Baker dedicated his "Concerto for

Violin and Orchestra" to her in 2006. She led warmly into the moodiness of the first movement, "Sparks!!!" and I wondered what that title was all about. A change in the middle answered that question, before Monroe's solo cadenza began. For the next several minutes she wrapped melody, rhythm and over-the-top intensity into an amazing musical narrative. After the concert, she confessed that less than half was written down — the rest was on the spot improvisation. Phenomenal! The second movement, "Lingering Thoughts," was reminiscent of eastern European melodies, with some upbeat dancing snuggled into the center. The finale, "Where Did the Balloons Go?" was high-energy, with chimes and full orchestra adding to the impact. In retrospect, J.S. Bach would have been in his own rapture at this creative partnership.

After intermission, the

stage was filled with the DSSO Chorus and soprano Regina Zona, as Thakar led a dynamic performance of Poulenc's setting of the Mass text of the "Gloria." Written around 1960, this six-movement work sounds like a blend between the cathedral and the cabaret, an idea Poulenc found pleasing. The chorus sings the text energetically, and the orchestra offers moments of jazz, parade, folk song and sincere supplication as accompaniment. In two movements Zona adds an exquisitely high, emotional frosting in the center of this otherwise exuberant hymn of praise.

Musically, the genuine frivolity of the "Laudamus te" seemed too brisk for the crisp coordination of the brass, strings and chorus. In the slower sections, however, I felt that Thakar sometimes was conducting the orchestra, rather than the text/chorus, and some of Poulenc's own sense of faith

seemed neglected.

These emotions spilled wondrously over into a performance of the Sibelius' "Finlandia," led by Jun Kim, a young conductor from Springfield, Ohio. He had participated in the April workshop Thakar hosted here with the DSSO, and he was the orchestra's selection for this cameo appearance.

Thakar took this enthusiastic wave and led the chorus and orchestra in a rousing performance of Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture." With the text of hymns inserted in the 1960s to Tchaikovsky's orchestral original, the overture began and ended with several hundred musicians on task. The bass drums and chimes were in motion as much as the entire orchestra, and this DSSO season came to a house-raising finale.

SAMUEL BLACK writes about music for the News Tribune.