

## Okanagan Symphony: Suites and Serenades

BY NICHOLAS KELLY | MARCH 15, 2021

Exactly one year after the world seemed to shut down, the Okanagan Symphony presented its second livestreamed concert of 2021. I was one of the few audience members lucky enough to attend in person, and my first live concert since July did not disappoint.

Titled *Suites & Serenades*, the program featured 16 string players from the OSO masked and spread out across the stage at the Kelowna Community Theatre. While this may seem a far cry from the over-100-piece ensemble that sometimes filled the stage at past OSO concerts, the string section packed the expressive punch of an ensemble several times larger. The program — thoughtfully curated and passionately conducted by Music Director Rosemary Thomson — showcased the string orchestra's full range.

It began with *St. Paul's Suite* by Gustav Holst. Despite its simple, folksy surface, this piece is full of nuances that keep the performers and listeners on their toes. For the most part, Thomson and the string players navigated its unexpected juxtapositions between different melodies, moods, and metres with seemingly effortless playfulness, highlighting the music's many eccentricities and surprises while maintaining a sense of seamless continuity.

Things became a bit more serious in the third movement, which featured an extended violin solo. The tune is a simple, sombre air, but in the hands of concertmaster Rachel Kristenson it became a thing of plaintive beauty. The music takes a brighter turn after a viola solo (played with tender lyricism by Ashley Kroecher) joins in with an echo of the violin's tune — as if to say “you're not alone” — and the movement ends on a note of peaceful acceptance. Whether Maestra Thomson intended it or not, it's difficult not to read something of the current situation into this — and hopefully draw a bit of reassurance from it.

The next piece on the program — the mesmerising *Solace* by living Canadian composer Jocelyn Morlock — takes the idea of reassurance to a new level. The titular solace presumably comes from the cello solo that underlies the piece — played with assuring, steadfast warmth by Olivia Walsh — which serves to ground Rachel Kristenson's restless, soulful violin solo. Both soloists were skilful and convincing, but the rest of the orchestra made *Solace* especially memorable.

If you're tuning in to this concert digitally, it's essential to use headphones to experience *Solace* fully. The sustained, kaleidoscopically-shifting harmonies of the orchestra are something to immerse oneself in, not simply listen to. The glassy sound of half the orchestra playing softly without vibrato combines with the wispy, ethereal harmonics of the other half to create a sense of something vast and shimmering, but gentle. (Orchestra members said it reminded them of the Northern Lights, and it's easy to hear why.) The musicians blended sensitively in these haunting sonorities, creating a resonance in which it was sometimes difficult to discern individual notes.

Last on the program was Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*, which, in the words of Maestra Thomson, embodies “the struggle and yearning for all good things in the world.” Particularly compelling was the third movement, whose lush, expansive melodies may bring opera to mind. A wide dynamic range and sensitive phrasing brought these tunes — and their dramatic development — vividly to life.

The fourth movement included the most intricate music on the program. The melody is thrown around the entire orchestra with joyful abandon, with the rest of the ensemble pushing it forward in brisk, swirling lines. I could sense at least a few musicians breaking a sweat as they went through this movement's acrobatics, but the ensemble cohered through even the fastest, most convoluted moments and remained well-balanced during the movement's complex counterpoint. The orchestra making it through that maelstrom together to play the final triumphant hymn seemed a fitting conclusion to the program.

Attending this performance in person served as a reminder of something I had taken for granted until 2020: the joy of simply making music with other people. How amazing is it that people gather in the same place with no other goal than creating something beautiful, together, in the moment? I'm thankful to Thomson and the OSO for finding ways to remind us of that beauty, and I for one won't take it for granted again anytime soon.

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