

No Concerts in 11 months, but the OSO hasn't Missed a Beat

BY GRAHAM VINK — FEBRUARY 9, 2021, KELOWNA, BC

This past Friday night, I had an opportunity to do something novel and strange. I sat in the Kelowna Community Theatre with a few others from the OSO organization, along with a small army of tech wizards from Unicorns.live who were responsible for putting this live-stream event together. Masked and appropriately distanced, of course. Cut-outs in the front half of the theatre waited silently for Rosemary Thomson and a reduced, masked, socially-distanced cohort of OSO players to take the stage. From the very first notes, I remembered how much I missed this. Live music, played by live humans, all in the same place. What a delight. They did not disappoint.

Simply titled "Water Music", the program opened with selections from George Frideric Handel's Water Music from Suite No. 1 in F major. Handel was a popular composer, best known for *Messiah*. In her opening remarks, Rosemary Thomson noted that King George I commissioned this work during a time of political upheaval, and it resulted in Handel's first visit to London. Fifty musicians were loaded onto a Royal barge and towed up the Thames River for their performances, all part of a big party organized by the King as a distraction from certain realities.

From the stately opening overture through to the final notes of this first suite, the OSO put on an impressive performance. Ms. Thomson made excellent choices with tempos that stayed true to the character of each form, but maintained variety and energy throughout the suite. Almost every section of the orchestra had prominent moments with beautiful oboe and violin solos, horn calls, bassoon and oboe duos, and of course the foundational playing of the strings throughout. There were the odd moments of uncertainty in tempo, but they were recovered from quickly, and I was genuinely impressed with the clarity of counterpoint and sequences that are such a central part of this Baroque style. There were lovely color changes, and surprising scale in the orchestra's dynamics, testament to a cohesion that existed across the ensemble, and with their conductor.

"Writ in Water" by composer Kevin Lau was next on the program; this title is derived from the epitaph on the gravestone of English poet John Keats which reads "Here lies One whose Name is writ in Water". Kevin Lau states that the music reflects mortality and impermanence, and the fleeting nature of existence, and that the five stages of grief as per the Kubler-Ross model provided him with an initial guide. The opening pizzicato strings seemed to fade in from nothing, and there was a melancholy quality to the opening moments with clashing harmony and layered textures under a beautiful but haunting violin melody. Lau's exploration of sounds from bygone composers was evident, there were harmonic moments that reminded me of Mahler and Barber, and textural ones that reminisced of Baroque composers like Handel and Bach. Again, there was excellent ensemble playing here by all involved as motives and phrases would emerge, but take unresolved turns and descend into stark, almost creepy moments. The strings provided a myriad of effects with relentless bass and cello parts, and swirling lines from the violins. Sound seemed to emerge and disappear seamlessly, and soared in moments of clarity and beauty before fading away and vanishing to end the work, much as it had begun.

Handel's Second Suite from Water Music concluded the program, and the OSO delivered this with the same energy and grace as the opening suite. Joined by two trumpets, the ensemble finished strong, and I could go on to praise the same things as I did of the opening suite. I think the joy of being back

together on stage after 11 months of Covid restrictions was palpable, and I have to say one more time that the sound coming from this group was remarkable given that single reality. Survive the year that we have all had, get back together in vastly reduced numbers, have some rehearsals, and go perform. It's a testament to the skill, the love, and the heart that these fine musicians and their fearless conductor bring to the stage. If you plan on listening to the recording at home, get the cabling you need to connect it to a real stereo. Headphones if they're a better option. Do better than a little Bluetooth speaker, or computer speakers. This music demands it, and you deserve to hear this fully. Enjoy the sounds of your OSO in the best way possible right now, and look forward to hearing it live when restrictions inevitably lift. The OSO will be looking forward to it, and so will I.

Graham Vink is a Kelowna-based pianist. He also teaches, and is the former Artistic Director of the Kelowna Community Music School.