

NHSO: Finale was perfect end to a stellar season

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People don't argue about classical music the way they do about sports. You might expect to overhear strident disputes on your way out of a concert, such as Thursday's season finale by the New Haven Symphony Orchestra - or at least strongly voiced opinions from fans disputing a tempo choice or protesting some lapse by a soloist or instrumental section.

Does this mute acceptance indicate indifference on the part of music fans? The Woolsey Hall audience was on its feet Thursday evening after the "Ode to Joy" that brought Ludwig van Beethoven's ever-popular Ninth Symphony in D minor to a thunderous close. The same composer's briefer Symphony No. 8 in F major, had some performance slip-ups, yet was greeted by the over-indulgent cheers you expect from Little League parents.

Classical music aficionados are capable of surly second-guessing, of course. But only if a star has canceled an appearance, or if they are subjected to a heavy dose of dissonance or arid experimentation - in other words, "modern" music.

The New Haven Symphony Orchestra made its audience feel victorious throughout this 116th season, first of all by scheduling a diet of absolutely reliable hits. Beethoven's nine symphonies, balm to the ear and heart, are also among the undisputed monuments of our civilization. By now their originality - so modern and dissonant to early 19th century ears - is mostly familiar and reassuring without any loss of excitement. This is especially true when these works are played with the vigor and refinement we heard in New Haven in these seven concerts.

If the 2009-'10 reliance on Beethoven looks a little cautious, you have to remember all the concert halls and opera houses across the land that went dark during this same season. Even critical fans would agree that it was time for a safe play.

But the spirit of adventure survived. The orchestra sampled the milder side of iconoclasts Anton Webern and Arnold Schoenberg. NHSO also secured funding for two composers-in-residence, who seasoned the menu with some welcome novelties. American composer Augusta Read Thomas has the knack of putting bewitching instrumental combinations to unexpected, far-ranging use, as she proved on two different occasions. Her "Ritual Incantations for Cello and Orchestra," was especially substantial.

The other new voice came from Asia: Korean composer-percussionist Jin Hi Kim offered two works that breathed an irresistible rhythmic energy.

We also have to note another unusual project that could help stretch the audience comfort zone: The Walton Project, in collaboration with the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (see article, D1), to

explore the music of British composer William Walton.

Conductor William Boughton deserves credit for maintaining focus on core values at a time when some music directors might have lunged desperately at novelties or infusions of crossover repertoire. The orchestra's playing has gained steadily in discipline and confidence during his three seasons. Boughton's serious approach - as he proved in standard works and innovative pieces alike - provides a firm grounding for the big, exciting effects that some musicians try to achieve through shortcuts or gimmickry.

This final event of the season also proved anew that concertmaster Ani Kavafian was a great draft pick. Both symphonies on this program ran into occasional dicey moments, especially the intonation in Beethoven's tricky transition passages. But the secure work of the string sections led by Kavafian helped restore harmony and control. These players excelled above all in the Ninth's searching slow movement.

This offering of the spectacular Beethoven Ninth was the only time this season that we got to hear a choral work. When the choir in question happens to be, as here, the sterling Hartford Chorale (under music director Richard Coffey), the combination of well-focused, richly layered vocal tone in sync with the mighty orchestra can only leave an audience hoping for more such collaborations. The steady soloists in the "Ode to Joy" were soprano Adele Paxton, mezzo-soprano Chrystal E. Williams, tenor Marc Deaton and an especially resonant and expressive baritone, Andrew Brown.

This NHSO concert was the perfect wrap-up for what proved, against tough odds, a winning season.

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