

Barrie Concert Review – Saturday April 27th, 2019 Gershwin Greats



Review by Catherine Waffle - Catherine Waffle is a cellist, former piano teacher, choral singer and retired elementary school teacher and choral director.

The full house at Hiway Pentecostal Church had come to hear The Toronto Concert Orchestra with guest artists, soprano Alyssa DiMarco and pianist Anna Shalaykevych. They would be performing a program celebrating the works of George Gershwin. The crowd was also gathered to see and hear Maestro Kerry Stratton. Mr. Stratton has been bringing his orchestras and ensembles to Barrie (through Barrie Concerts) for 30 years. He is beloved in this community and several others between Barrie and Toronto. It is widely known now that Maestro Stratton's life was changed when he was recently diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). While he was not able to conduct the concert, he was determined to be present in order to deliver his characteristic remarks and introductions of the musical material. The audience welcomed him with a lengthy and heartfelt standing ovation as he was assisted to the stage. An equally hearty cheer went up as Mr. Stratton proclaimed, "I have ALS but ALS does NOT have me!" With that, he introduced conductor, Dr. Marcus Scholtes, and the energetic music began.

The Concert Orchestra, consisting of a small string section, woodwinds, brass, guitar, keyboard and percussion, demonstrated their skill with this early 20th Century repertoire (primarily Gershwin). "Puttin' on the Ritz", by Irving Berlin, got the audience in the mood with a jazzy, lively sound. Winds and percussive elements led the way. Soprano Alyssa DiMarco took the stage for the next several numbers. Her light, clear soprano voice and playful stage presence brought life to songs such as "Ain't We Got Fun", "Someone to Watch Over Me" and "Embraceable You". The guitar added several jazz riffs in solo passages. The orchestral accompaniments sometimes played it straight and, at other times, let it swing. Ms. DiMarco's vocal range was on display in "But Not For Me". The song requires sultry low tones but bell-like clarity in the upper register. The orchestra was able to showcase their talents in a few numbers where various musicians took turns at solo work or tight section passages. Dr. Scholtes demonstrated his ability to control and direct pieces with demanding rhythms and changes in tempo or metre. This was most evident in an audience favourite, the Medley from Porgy and Bess. Even without singers, this operatic, jazz-influenced music came alive.

The second half of the program offered some sophisticated arrangements of pieces like “Cheek to Cheek”. The orchestra achieved wonderful balance between winds, brass and strings with some shimmering effects from percussion. Ms. DiMarco returned for two songs and gave the audience a shining moment in “Summertime” from Porgy and Bess. It showcased her power, pitch and vocal warmth.

Pianist, Anna Shalaykevych took the stage for the finale; Gershwin’s most beloved “Rhapsody in Blue”. Her dynamic, energetic playing and her mastery of the tempo, rhythmic and quasi-improvisational demands of this music brought the house down. Another lengthy standing ovation capped off the night.