

The Gathering Note

NW Sinfonietta returns to Nordstrom Recital Hall

By Zach Carstensen



Northwest Chamber Orchestra died near the end of their 2005-2006 season. For a good number of people in the know, the end was inevitable. A crisis in leadership went unanswered and fiscal problems mounted. It wasn't a matter of if, but when. When the NWCO went, so did a resident orchestra for the Nordstrom Recital Hall. The 540 seat venue is popular with local musicians and chamber ensembles, but is also the right size for a small to medium sized orchestra.

Enter the Northwest Sinfonietta.

The Tacoma based orchestra has split its performances between Seattle and Tacoma now for almost ten years. This past Friday, the orchestra began a residency in the hall the NWCO left vacant.

It isn't the first time the chamber orchestra has played in the Nordstrom Recital Hall. In 1999, when the orchestra began pushing out beyond Tacoma,

they played at Benaroya. Later, the orchestra ended up at the cost-effective Town Hall.

Gradually, the Sinfonietta has been building an audience. The feat isn't easy in a town saturated with what seems like an orchestra for every neighborhood. "Right now, we're just carpetbaggers selling tickets," remarked Neil Birnbaum, the orchestra's Executive Director before Friday's concert. The audience is coming. Friday's audience was younger, larger, and more enthusiastic than what Chagnard and his band had for the first concert of the season. The program might have helped. The composers and pieces were recognizable to neophytes and experts alike.

Continuing the season-long look at the 20th Century, this time the emphasis was on the French Impressionists - Ravel, Debussy, and De Falla. Three suites, one piano concerto - Ravel's Piano Concerto in G. Joel Fan, the Silk Road Project's resident pianist joined the orchestra for the piano concerto.

The intimate setting of the Nordstrom Recital Hall helped contain the energy of the audience and the orchestra. The fan-like arrangement of pews at Town Hall don't box the music in the way Nordstrom does. The usual emptiness at either end of the hall, left and right of the Town Hall stage, are sound sponges that seem to sop up whatever is being played.

This isn't to say Nordstrom is perfect. There is some harshness in the acoustics. But, as one member of the orchestra said, "I could hear the rest of the orchestra." True. No doubt this transparency helped Chagnard and his band create a performance that was both exceptionally detailed and vital. If the orchestra can't hear what is going on in other sections playing will suffer. As the person to my left remarked, "they are playing in tune and playing together...that IS the battle."

Debussy's *Petite Suite*, De Falla's Suite from the *Three Cornered Hat*, and Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* didn't wear well as the first half of the concert. In order to accommodate the addition of the piano for the Ravel concerto, *Le Tombeau* was moved up, rather than coming after the intermission. A back-to-back procession of French orchestra suites stifled the music, adding to the impression we were just hearing more of the same. A break between the suites, as was originally imagined, would have helped.

It is cliché to say, but Christophe Chagnard, French by birth, radiated Ravel and Debussy. Ravel's *Le Tombeau* was brilliant, detailed and textured. Chagnard minded the balances in the tight, Nordstrom Recital Hall. Later when Joel Fan joined the orchestra on stage for the piano concerto, Chagnard and his group were amiable partners, generating an enjoyable performance of the composer's two-handed piano concerto. Fan has ability to spare, and it was only with an encore, that the audience got to hear what a more a

challenging piano concerto would have shown immediately.

With the Northwest Sinfonietta back in Benaroya Hall, Seattle's signature classical music venue has two resident orchestras. The move will no doubt elevate the profile of the orchestra and help build on the growing audience. If the Twin Cities can have the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and the Minnesota Orchestra, then Seattle should be able to accommodate the Northwest Sinfonietta and the Seattle Symphony.

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This entry was posted on Wednesday, November 26th, 2008 at 5:05 pm and is filed under [Seattle, WA](#). You can