

Chickens and doilies

LSO sweats the details, wrapped in Victorian wool

By LAWRENCE COSENTINO

Some people can't talk about anything but the one time they saw the mating dance of the lesser prairie chicken. ("I was only 30 feet away!") They

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may have rafted up the Grand Canyon, climbed Yosemite and escaped a bear attack on the same trip out west, but that chicken dance is the only thing that lights them up.

After Saturday's Lansing Symphony Orchestra concert, I understand the feeling. The orchestra covered a lot of ground, digging into three leisurely and expansive Romantic era works with great attention to detail. But the transcendent moment, for me, came near the end of the second part of Max Bruch's "Scottish Fantasy."

After a melancholy glide over the highland hills and a lusty plunge into Scottish folk tunes, guest soloist Rachel Barton Pine shook off the nostalgia and traded hushed

trills with principal flutist Richard Sherman — just the two of them. The duet was over in 30 seconds, but I felt privileged. It was as if I'd glimpsed rare birds through the parted mists, having a moment of pure joy all to themselves.

That's the way it went all night. Despite the expansive sweep of three Romantic works, this was a concert for the connoisseur of finely wrought, fleeting details.

It's a good thing Pine brought her zest for folk-fiddling to the Bruch concerto. It's lyrical and atmospheric, for sure, but almost terminally decorous. Most recordings of the concerto sink into a soporific, gauzy dreamland. But Pine brought real energy to the music, unleashing a low register that pulled like a North Sea undertow.

A bit of extra drama turned up, by accident, toward the end of the concerto. Just as Pine launched into the triumphant final movement, the chin rest came loose from her violin and dropped on the floor. She couldn't fasten it back onto her fiddle in time for her next entrance, so Maestro Timothy Muffitt stopped the show, waited for her to reattach it, and started the movement over.

The recovery was an admirable display of professionalism by all. Within five seconds, Pine was spinning nimble, mercurial variations on the rollicking theme as the orchestra hoofed it (figuratively) behind her.

Pine's stage presence, neither aloof nor affectedly "passionate," exuded a Chicago-style joy in hard work. Her encore took the energy up a notch. Talking directly to the audience, Pine introduced a Chicago colleague, champion Scottish fiddler Tim MacDonald, who joined her on stage in full Scottish regalia. It was the first time at the symphony — at least as far as I know of — that a guest brought a guest.

In the spirit of Bruch, the two fiddlers teamed up for a medley of Scottish folk tunes. Best of all, ultra-serious LSO principal cellist Hong Hong joined in the jigging, adding an atmospheric drone and harmonies.

Saturday's opener, the rarely heard overture to Hector Berlioz's "King Lear," is one of those works that comes together slowly, in fragments, before whipping up a storm. The orchestra and Muffitt handled the frequent fits, halts and change-ups in the music with consummate deftness, assembling a mosaic suggesting a Shakespearean king clinging to ceremony despite growing madness.

Antonín Dvořák's Eighth Symphony, the night's epic closer, served up more folk-flavored music, this time from Bohemia. The performance was meticulous, finely wrought and occasionally stirring — but in an oddly distant way.

I blame that on the music, not on the musicians, who are as capable, if not more

capable, than ever. The solos were exquisite yet well blended into the overall fabric. The quickest dynamic changes were executed with seamless subtlety. The thunder thundered, the caresses caressed, the wistful waltz wistfully waltzed. Doublings of winds and strings or strings and brass rolled off the stage as smooth as double layered cream.

But I wonder if even the most meticulous, loving rendition of Dvořák's Eighth Symphony isn't doing the community, or even the musicians, much of a favor. The predictable Romantic era roundelay of build-ups, interludes, recapitulations and climaxes needs the megalomaniacal spark of a Beethoven, a Mahler or even a Tchaikovsky, to pop in the 21st century. (And sometimes even then ...)

Muffitt seems determined to give us every major museum piece in the repertoire before Ragnarok comes. But Dvořák, a Czech, suffers from middle European middle-of-the-road-ness, in spite of his much-vaunted folk flavor. Muffled in Victorian wool, the old boy sounds older than revolutionaries like Beethoven or Bach, who came well before him. Layering Dvořák's gilded-framed Eighth onto the old-timey Bruch concerto made for a decidedly sepia-toned, doily-adorned evening at the symphony. Hitler, Stalin and Walt Disney notwithstanding, it made me miss the 20th century, let alone the one we live in.