

RSO brings far corners to Star City

Concert review: Symphony travels exotic locales and concludes with powerful playing of "Scheherazade."

By Seth Williamson | Special to The Roanoke Times

The English poet Philip Larkin unwittingly paid tribute to the power of classical music when he famously said, "I wouldn't mind seeing China if I could come back the same day."

That, of course, is just what great music can do. And the Roanoke Symphony Orchestra took concertgoers on a tour of exotic locales Monday night at the Roanoke Performing Arts Theatre -- and everybody got to go home and sleep in their own bed when it was over.

RSO music director David Wiley presented a series of Romantic-era super-hits that evoked remote destinations from the fiords of Norway to desert caravans.

After a spirited reading of the Act III Prelude from Wagner's "Lohengrin," Maestro Wiley conducted "In the Steppes of Central Asia," Alexander Borodin's musical portrait of an exotic caravan.

Virginia Tech theater professor Doug Zschiegner, in an expressive light-baritone speaking voice, narrated bits of Henrik Ibsen's tale of "Peer Gynt," with three of the most famous sections from Edvard Grieg's incidental music to that play.

The last half of the concert was devoted to Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's massive orchestral tour de force "Scheherazade." RSO concertmaster Akemi Takayama starred, with her voluptuous tone and sensuous portamento setting the mood from the first bars.

To accentuate the work's antiphonal effects, a few sections were in unfamiliar spots onstage. Some brass players were assigned new zip codes, with trombones and tuba at extreme stage left and trumpets nearly opposite.

A newcomer in the trumpet section was hometown gal Ashley Hall as acting principal. The Wythe County native, now making a name for herself in the formerly male-dominated world of symphonic trumpet, is one of the finest young brass talents I've heard. The cut-glass precision of her double- and triple-tonguing was much in evidence toward the end of the Rimsky-Korsakov.

There was an occasional lack of unanimity among the first and second violins as to placement of accents and intonation, which "mushed up" the effect of certain rapid tutti passages on one or two occasions. But the overall effect was powerful. A veritable river of hummable melodies, "Scheherazade" is one of the repertoire's classic "starter pieces," having introduced millions to the power of the symphony orchestra.

After a standing ovation for the Rimsky-Korsakov, the RSO rewarded the audience with a few bars of the "Bacchanale" from Saint-Saens' "Samson and Delilah" and a reprise of "In the Hall of the Mountain King" from "Peer Gynt."

Seth Williamson produces feature news stories and a weekday classical music program on public radio station WUTF (89.1 FM) in Roanoke.