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Review: Springtime Auburn gets a taste of Russian Winter, courtesy of ASO

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The Auburn Symphony Orchestra with contralto Kyra Humphrey and the Federal Way Chorale presented a rousing Russian program.

By Bernard Jacobson

With a membership drawn from the Pacific Northwest Ballet and other players who freelance in the area, the Auburn Symphony Orchestra is obviously smaller in prestige — and budget — than its famous counterpart in Seattle. But the concert it played on Saturday in the Auburn School District's 1,100-seat Auburn Performing Arts Center showed it to be an unmistakably professional ensemble with high artistic standards of its own and an evidently dedicated local following.

Music director Stewart Kershaw, who held the same post at PNB from 1980 until last October, founded the Auburn Symphony 14 years ago. Before the concert, he and KUOW producer Dave Beck (a member of the excellent cello section) talked entertainingly about the program, which paired two works evoking the Russian winter: Tchaikovsky's First Symphony, subtitled "Winter Dreams," and Prokofiev's "Alexander Nevsky," based on music the composer wrote for Sergei Eisenstein's famous film.

The preconcert presentation included evocative clips from the movie, but its 1938 soundtrack was no match for the sonic impact of the live orchestra. Kershaw demonstrated impressive command of his forces, and Prokofiev's score came across with unflinching power and brilliance. The 60-member Federal Way Chorale sang with gusto, though the sopranos were somewhat overshadowed by the richer-toned lower voices. Kyra Humphrey, whose contralto voice is affecting in timbre if not entirely even across the range, projected the work's one solo movement with strong feeling and excellent diction. But I regretted the decision to perform the work in English instead of the much more atmospheric original Russian.

At the center of the cantata is a thrillingly kinetic depiction of the battle in which Russia's 13th-century hero defeated the invading Knights of the Teutonic Order, trapping them on the ice of Lake Chud, which obligingly cracked under their weight.

For my taste, the quieter sections of the Prokofiev, especially the hushed passage that concludes the “Battle on the Ice,” are more rewarding than the rhythmically square battle itself. Finer still is the accomplished symphony that began Tchaikovsky’s symphonic career when he was only 26. It’s a modest work, but a technically proficient one, and parts of it — especially the delicious waltz in the middle of the scherzo — point vividly forward to the better-known Tchaikovsky of the ballets and the later symphonies.

Unanimous strings, affectionate woodwind phrasing, an impressively secure horn section and rousing work from percussion and heavy brass ensured a convincing and highly enjoyable account of both works.

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