

Mighty fine night

SoNA's Christmas present

--By Mike Masterson

LITTLE ROCK -- LITTLE ROCK; If you've grown weary of hearing me speak about the Symphony of Northwest Arkansas (aka SoNA), please bear with me for several more paragraphs.

Frankly, I never thought I'd ever have that much to say about symphonies either.

But that Christmas Pops event at the Walton Arts Center the other night proved to be yet another festive hoot that brought a cheering crowd to its feet several times. With good reason.

Paul Haas, the animated, longstriding, collar-length-locked new father from New York managed to charm the audience again. It's apparent to me that he has a natural gift for relating to people.

He knows when to smile, to pause for effect, to wink at the thousands watching and to publicly recognize his musicians and even when to serve up his surprises.

One of his greatest strengths, however, is simply understanding what kind of music and melodies will touch the hearts and souls of listeners and how to link those in the seats with their brethren in elegant black tie and gowns on the stage.

This concert was different than most in several ways. There were solo singers, high school ensembles and the SoNA singers peppered throughout a more than two-hour program broken up by a 15-minute intermission.

The Bentonville High School Chamber Choir, Har-Ber High School's Camerata Singers and the SoNA singers directed by Terry Hicks took turns lifting their voices to the symphonic melodies, sometimes singing together, each smiling and clearly enjoying their moments on stage.

I also couldn't help but examine each of those peachy-faced adolescents singing their hearts out and realize that only a few years ago they were children. And that all too soon, they'd be out here watching their own children.

Haas made certain this tightly choreographed shebang of satisfying sounds flowed in elegant harmony, much like the tender strains of a harp with 21 violins and cellos exquisitely blending.

Echo Sibley of the University of Arkansas music and drama departments was one soloist with "O Holy Night." Chantry Dean, worship leader at Calvary Tabernacle in Bentonville, sang "Mary, Did You Know?" I watched several orchestra members as each soloist raised their voice. Several of them were smiling with eyes closed, caught up in the transcendent power of those vocals.

As we all know, so much of this sacred season is rooted in music, which made it all the more satisfying.

Karen Kapella, the symphony's vibrant, sort of fireball executive director, thanked all the donors, particularly the generosity of the Willard and Pat Walker Charitable Foundation for a generous matching contribution that helped purchase some needed symphonic instruments.

At one point, radio personality Jim Bodine entered stage right to read "Twas the Night Before Christmas" as the orchestra softly accompanied with appropriate melody, percussion and timing. Something for everyone.

There was even a sing-along where well over 1,000 voices in the packed house rose in surprising crescendo and harmony.

It was done to Haas' continuous head-nod cues during four classic carols, all resonating against the

stirring backdrop of the symphony itself. Those combined choruses and the standing audience singing Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" brought a lump to my throat—and probably many others. Nothing resonates Christmas within me like that stirring piece of music.

Perhaps that's also what's behind the magic Haas conjures on stage. He looks for ways to be continually interactive with his audience. He seeks to make them feel an ownership of the evening. There are no doze-off moments when Haas has the baton in hand, waving and lunging to the rhythm, his hair constantly fluttering to the beat.

At one point he stepped into the spotlight to say the evening was as if everyone had gathered beneath the same tree to celebrate.

Then he stared into the dimly lit crowd and reminded everyone: "There's never too much love." And that, my friends, is how this conductor takes care of his business. He lays it out at the gut level with humor and people respond both to the authenticity and his abilities and personality.

I happened to be seated beside Northwest Arkansas' legendary and popular musician Jed Clampit, who makes Willie Nelson sound just like Jed Clampett. When the show had ended and the house lights came up, Jed's eyes were twinkling behind his long white beard and hair.

"That was just a wonderful show," he said. "Ya know, we musicians, whether we're hillbilly pickers or symphony players, all wind up pretty much working with the same eight chords. And they sure worked those eights and more mighty fine tonight."

Mike Masterson is opinion editor of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette's Northwest edition.

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