

# Two Beethoven Giants and a Dwarf Open Indian Hill Symphony Season

By McLaren Harris

This isn't a big anniversary year for Beethoven, but the composer has nonetheless taken the spotlight in early-season concerts by orchestras as near as the Boston Symphony and as far as the Spokane (Wash.) Symphony. Saturday night was the turn of the Indian Hill Symphony Orchestra under Music Director Bruce Hangen, which opened its season with a trio of his works, a dwarf and two giants, before a sellout audience in the Performing Arts Center at Littleton (Mass.) High School.

The opening piece was Beethoven's *Musik zu einem Ritterballet* (Music for a Knight's Ballet), an early work composed at the request of his friend and patron, Count von Waldstein. It is a series of little musical vignettes about hunting, love, battle and drinking, plus a lilting *ländler*, beginning with a march and interspersed by a rather insipid *Deutschgesang* refrain. The work's narrow confines of meter and harmony don't leave much room for invention, but it seemed to have worked in spite of its simplicity, as Count von Waldstein apparently passed it off as his own. The Indian Hill musicians gave it a competent, respectful reading.

The *Ritterballet* music is indeed a trifle when positioned next to a pair of monuments, the *Violin Concerto in D* and the "Mighty Fifth" *Symphony in C minor*. The Concerto is often called the finest such work in the violin repertoire, especially by soloists, because of its combination of compelling strength, lyric quality and balance of solo and orchestra parts. No argument here: from the symphonic-scale first movement to the final exclamatory chords, it received a deeply dynamic and expressive performance from soloist Bayla Keyes and the orchestra.

If you don't know about Bayla Keyes, a list of her former teachers, awards and concert venues will tell you a lot: Galimir, Galamian, Naumburg, Music from Marlboro and many others. She studied chamber music with the best and was a founding member of the Muir String Quartet at Boston University. Saturday night it all came to the fore; her well focused tone and flawless intonation (Thank you, Messrs. Galimir and Galamian) gave full expression to the work's expansive lyricism and maintained a strong dialogue with the orchestra. Virtuosity was evident, but musicality was paramount, even in the Kreisler cadenzas.

Conductor Bruce Hangen and the Indian Hill orchestra worked to ensure the partnership's success, fully dynamic but never overpowering, with excellent solo passages from the woodwinds and disciplined work in the strings.

Audiences are often led to visualize Beethoven's stern, frowning visage along with the opening notes of the Fifth Symphony and their characterization as "Fate knocking at the door." Don't believe it. Beethoven was looking for a simple *motif* to develop and propel an entire symphony of four movements and wanted it as strong as possible. Surrounded by critics and encroaching deafness, he needed to feel and express strength, and he succeeded "mightily." Even if you have heard it hundreds of times and think, "Oh, no," upon seeing it on the program, the Fifth can capture you anew with its power and grace, causing your hair to stand on end in both quiet and climactic passages.

Bruce Hangen understands the importance of the Fifth Symphony to both Beethoven's development and the history of orchestral music in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and he demanded the full range of dynamic response from the orchestra, taking the third movement at true Scherzo tempo and not shrinking a decibel from the *fortissimos* of the finale. The Indian Hill musicians were with him all the way; the low strings growled with a satisfying bite when called upon, the horns rang forth commandingly, the trombones gave depth and sonority to the brass and the whole orchestra, and the woodwinds again showed their artistry in small combinations – a true ensemble effort.

In her pre-concert remarks, Bayla Keyes suggested that performing and listening to such masterful music – especially the concerto, in her case – with its bringing together of great strength and beauty, both personal and universal, may actually have the power to make one a better person. Were we better for the experience of Saturday's concert? I think so.

*McLaren Harris is a former Boston music critic and long-time writer in public relations and communications for high technology and medicine.*