

Review: Tucson Symphony with Eroica Trio

Sometimes in classical music it helps to have a cheat sheet.

Better yet is when a conductor lets you in on all the nuances you might not catch, like how the solo violin in Richard Strauss' tone poem "Ein Heldenleben" represents the soothing, encouraging voice of a wife talking her ego-bruised husband off the ledge.

Just before the Tucson Symphony Orchestra performed the work to open its 84th season on Friday night, TSO Conductor George Hanson and his musicians demonstrated each role for the audience of 1,356. Hanson likes to think of "Ein Heldenleben" (A Hero's Life) as an opera without a libretto. The words are spoken through the instruments — the dominant major chord strings opening the work represent the hero and low brass and woodwinds playing multiple motifs are his adversaries. Their shrill taunts lead the hero to hang his head low when the opening theme is repeated in a minor chord.

We learned all of this in Hanson's 10-minute crash course, which included pop culture references to "Wayne's World," Toby Keith and Lee Trevino.

And when the orchestra performed the Strauss — the first time since 2000 — we could see the wife in acting Concertmaster Carla Ecker's splendid playing; she is sitting in for Concertmaster Aaron Boyd, who is on a season-long leave. And we heard the critics mocking and taunting the hero with a chromatic wall from the woodwinds, playing at the top of their game.

The Strauss came in the concert's second half, after an exciting, intimate and just plain fun performance of Beethoven's Triple Concerto by the estimable Eroica Trio.

This is an ensemble that dares you not to sit at the edge of your seat when cellist Sara Sant'Ambrogio played an extended solo passage, flexing her toned biceps as she drew the bow over the strings with a fluid, muscular motion. The sound was so rich and pure pianist Erika Nickrenz shot her a smile that spoke volumes of appreciation.

Throughout the performance, the trio shared intimate moments like this. Their smiles seemed on the verge of a giggle when violinist Sara Parkins, a newcomer to the trio, turned in an equally impressive solo turn; or when Nickrenz danced along the keyboard, adding a playful spirit to performance.

When they weren't playing, the trio shared animated gestures of appreciation for the orchestra, which seemed to revel in its role as accompanist in its first performance of the concerto in a dozen years.

This was the first time the Eroica Trio has played a Tucson concert since they were presented by the Arizona Friends of Chamber Music in 1999. Hopefully we won't have to wait as long for them to return.