

**Vancouver Symphony  
Orchestra**

Saturday, May 26, 8pm

Orpheum Theatre

by Colin MacDonald

The creation of new orchestral repertoire is a rare event, and the VSO should be congratulated for any work that it commissions and premieres. This concert gave the world premiere of a work by the Toronto-based composer Paul Steenhuisen, who returned to his native home to introduce this new piece.

*your soul is a bottle of thirsting salt*, the composer explained, depicted the restless searching, the eternally active impulse of the life-force that some call the soul. This unknown force that ceaselessly moves us was characterized musically by a very active melodic and textural palette. Excited trills and tremolos vibrated through the strings and woodwinds, fragmented melodies leapt from one instrumental group to another, and bursts of colour emerged unexpectedly from the brass and percussion. Particularly beautiful moments before the work's ending included a single note passing delicately among the first chairs of the string section, and a cantabile melody that dissolved into trills and drones before revealing the ghostly ringing of a vibraphone.

It seemed at first that it was a mistake to programme a premiere at the beginning of the concert, before our ears had a chance to warm up to the sound of the orchestra, but in retrospect, the Steenhuisen set up the other compositions very nicely. The heritage that this new work owed to the older repertoire was obvious in the shared compositional techniques, such as the way large structures were developed out of a small cell of melody, and the

repetition of melodic ideas in different instrumental groups. Philosophically and emotionally, all three pieces of the evening shared the same restless quality, the same searching that is a constant in artistic expression. That Steenhuisen achieved the effect in ten minutes, whereas the older composers took in excess of forty minutes each, says much about our compressed mode of living at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> C.

Filling out the first half of the program, the *Symphony No. 3* by Johannes Brahms was marched out like a true old warhorse. The opening movement lacked spirit in the tempo that Maestro Tovey set, and the energy never really picked up until the last movement, when the orchestra finally seemed to wake up to the piece. The lack of rhythmic vitality affected the precision of much of the piece, creating a mushy rather than sparkling sound, and tedium began to set into such a long work. The woodwind section should be congratulated for virtuosic ensemble work in the second movement, in writing that illustrated Brahms' debt to the model of Beethoven's "Pastorale" Symphony.

The audience favourite of the evening was Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 3*, with soloist Barry Douglas. A respected virtuoso, Douglas eagerly attacked this major work, his dancing hands spinning out chromatic filligrees around the simple folk-like melodies used to unify the piece. In the same way that a jazz soloist builds an improvisation around a popular melody, Rachmaninoff mined his own searching soul for the gems of emotion that were inspired by singable tunes.