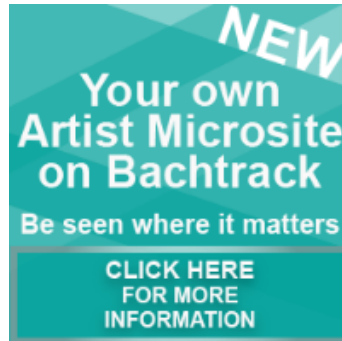




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A dynamic *Carmina Burana* at Wolf Trap

★★★★☆ ?

By Phillip Nones, 29 July 2017

The circumstances of this concert by the National Symphony at Wolf Trap, the orchestra's summer home, differed a little from the original plan. First, conductor [JoAnn Falletta](#) was stepping in under short notice for an indisposed Gianandrea Noseda. Second, the weather couldn't have been less co-operative, with more than three inches of rain falling during the two-hour show.

The concert consisted of two big works. First on the program was Beethoven's *Piano Concerto no. 5 in E flat major*. We all know it as the "Emperor" Concerto, not because the composer so named it but, as in the words of music producer Tom Null, "it so aptly captures the regality of the composer's biggest concerto: a majestic, sweeping and triumphant statement." That majesty was on display tonight as the young Korean pianist and 2015 International Chopin Competition prizewinner [Seong-Jin Cho](#) turned in a performance that sparkled on many levels. In the opening *Allegro* movement, the orchestra's powerful E flat chord along with the piano arpeggios set the stage for a memorable interplay between grand *tutti* orchestral moments and the solo passages. While I sensed a few spots where there may not have been complete synchronization, I was favorably impressed with the overall sweep of the movement.

The *Adagio* came as a great contrast, with a beautifully rendered theme of such calm restraint and muted beauty, it captured the audience's rapt attention; one hardly noticed the steady pounding of the rain in the background. The players conveyed a great sense of depth as well as serenity, and at times the piano sounded almost celesta-like in its tones. The modulation at the end of the movement from B to B flat to E flat was a magical moment.



JoAnn Falletta

© David Adam Beloff

The final Rondo movement gave us dazzling passages by the full orchestra, even as Cho emphasized the playful aspects of the lilting 6/8 rhythm. There were a few moments, however, where his playing was a little slapdash, seeming to overplay the music to a degree. But a very special moment was the “duet” between the piano and timpani just before the final flourish of scales, bringing the concerto to a highly satisfying conclusion.

Following the short intermission, it was on to Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. The one indisputable “hit” of this composer, whose career wasn't anything particularly noteworthy prior to this work's première in 1937, it's one of those choral pieces that defies description. Derided by some of the stuffier musical cognoscenti among us as something just this side of cheap and vulgar, it nevertheless possesses an undeniable attraction. Is its style imitative? Yes – but it's done in a way that's undeniably interesting. Not only do choruses love singing this music, musicians enjoy playing it and, not least, audiences adore it.

There are performance challenges, of course. Orff's treatment of the three important solo vocal parts is certainly unorthodox, calling for extremely high *tessitura*. The choral parts call for all manner of voicings. Many productions have responded by cobbling together choral groups of every stripe. Such was the case tonight, which featured no fewer than six groups, all brought together for this performance by Scott Tucker, director of the Washington Choral Arts Society.

I don't think I've ever personally experienced a “bad” live performance of *Carmina*; in many places in the score the music is so exciting, it almost plays itself. Still, there can be some nettlesome passages. Happily, this production tackled them all well. All three vocal soloists were impressive. Their voices were miked – a requirement considering the set-up at Wolf Trap – which did pose some challenges for baritone Brian Mulligan as he tended to sway about when singing, causing his voice to cut in and out. Amusingly, we were also treated to an *obbligato* accompaniment from some rather persistent frogs during several of the solo vocal passages!

The combined choral groups exhibited fine intonation and tight ensemble. Falletta devoted much of her conducting energies to the chorus, which paid off handsomely in a performance of uncommon effectiveness; the best *Carmina* chorus I've ever heard live, actually.

As for the NSO players, they were exceptional. The stentorian brass forces in the *Fortuna* theme and in the *Primo vere* section were thrilling. Woodwind playing throughout was also exemplary, and the all-important percussion parts in the score were exceedingly well-done.

Binding it all together was an interpretation by Falletta that worked exceedingly well on a macro level. The piece's numerous “episodes” were pulled together nicely, and there was no sense of repetition in the triple stanzas in Orff's score – something that can happen in some less inspired performances. In all, it was a supremely satisfying account, delivering the kind of freshness and excitement one might experience when encountering this music for the very first time.



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Reviewed at Wolftrap National Park for the Performing Arts: Filene Center, Vienna on 28 July 2017

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PROGRAMME

Beethoven, Piano Concerto no. 5 in E flat major "Emperor", Op.73

Orff, *Carmina Burana*

PERFORMERS

National Symphony Orchestra

Seong-Jin Cho, *Piano*

Amy Owens, *Soprano*

Nicholas Phan, *Tenor*

Brian Mulligan, *Baritone*

The Choral Arts Society of Washington

The Washington Chorus

Capitol Hill Chorale

Fairfax Choral Society

The Heritage Signature Chorale

The Reston Chorale

JoAnn Falletta, *Conductor*

Children's Chorus of Washington

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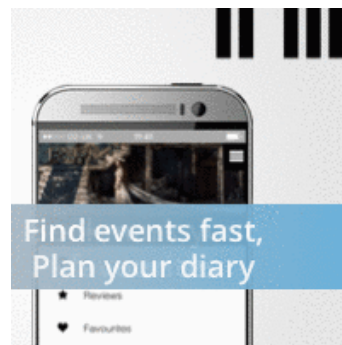
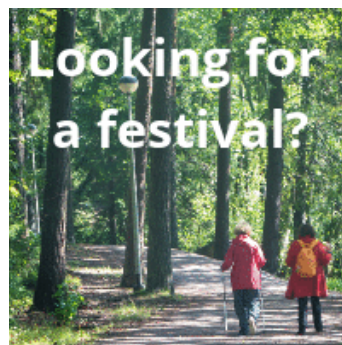
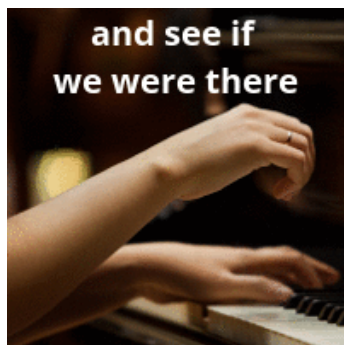
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Phillip Nones

Phillip Nones studied piano from age six, also playing percussion in educational and civic groups before moving to a rural area of the USA in 1990, where performance opportunities were few. Recently he has started performing again, participating in "side-by-side" orchestra performances and playing percussion in the World Doctors' Orchestra. His personal collection of music includes over 5,000 classical albums in all formats (CDs, LPs, 78s), plus downloads. In his professional life, he heads up a marketing communications firm in the state of Maryland. He blogs about the French composer Florent Schmitt [here](#).

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