

DELIGHTFUL MUSIC, FIT FOR A HOLIDAY MOOD

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As a festive prelude to the Grand Illumination Sunday, the Williamsburg Symphonia added a Holiday Pops Concert to the merry mix, easily helping spread the cheer that dominates the month. Under the baton of guest conductor-composer, Captain Silas Huff, Commander of the U.S. Army School of Music at Little Creek Expeditionary Base in Virginia Beach, the Symphonia delivered a Santa's bag filled with musical gifts.

With the Kimball Theatre decked out with Christmas trees, stockings hung with care, and even a sleigh from which Huff conducted, the feeling of Christmas was in the air.

The hour-long program offered songs both familiar and otherwise, all drawn from the holiday library. Among the many were "A Most Wonderful Christmas" and its upbeat take on popular tunes, Huff's snazzy "Big Brass Swingin' Christmas," "March of the Toys," and an energized "Rocket Sleigh" which opened the fare.

Sarah Kate Walston, Richmond soprano of notable experience and quality, added to the joy with excellent renderings of "Christmas Song," "White Christmas," Music from "Frozen," and a saucy "Santa Baby."

Quite effective were rear screen projections of thematic images tied to each work. The ultimate success of this coalesced poignantly in "I'll Be Home for Christmas," which Walston sensitively sang as images of deployed service members during the holidays filled the screen. No doubt, the sentiment and deserving tribute drew a few moist eyes.

The event, which was superbly conducted and emceed by Huff, closed with "Sleigh Ride." Here Huff turned the podium over to Beverly Baldwin, who won the bid to conduct the orchestra at a Symphonia auction. Quite obviously, she was no novice. Her years of choral singing and non-orchestral conducting were on full display as she successfully led the "Sleigh" and the program to a joyful close.

As a respite from the glow of candlelight and carols throughout town, the Chamber Music Society of Williamsburg presented the Boston Piano Trio in Tuesday's Williamsburg Library Theatre program. The Boston Trio boasts a perfectly assembled membership. Irina Muresanu, violin, Astrid Schween, cello, and Heng-Jin Park, piano, have significant individual international credentials that superbly align with the intimate and collaborative demands of a trio.

Their composite sound was rich and rewarding, absolutely balanced, and technically tops. The interplay among them was evident in heightened sensitivities, polished playing, and a feeling that they really do enjoy playing with each other.

To Mozart's opening Piano Trio in C Major, the Boston brought lightness and delicacy that highlighted the work's structure and to Beethoven's Piano Trio in C Minor, an effective balance between turbulence and calming lyricism.

However, the evening's big moment was Debussy's "La Mer," as arranged by Sally Beamish. Debuted only two years ago, it was our distinct good fortune to hear such a brilliantly conceived and performed piece. Beamish undertook the daunting task of arranging the iconic orchestral "La Mer," with its vast palette of impressionistic colors and surging themes, for a piano trio. However, she did it.

The full sweep and scope of the large orchestral piece was perfectly placed within score, the larger work's emotions and visual qualities flourishing in the transformation. The excitement of hearing this "La Mer" was matched by watching the Boston play it. The trio masterfully and musically maneuvered the tricky and challenging score, giving it abundant physical and emotional dedication and attention. What a magical treat!