

**Name:** Esther T. Jones

**Course:** Hon MUS 102

**Date:** 11<sup>th</sup> December 2010

**Concert:** Pennsylvania Regional Ballet Orchestra (December 4<sup>th</sup> 2010 Saturday 2:00pm)

**Type of concert:** Ballet (Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker)

**General reaction:** I very much enjoyed the performance, especially as I have not attended the Nutcracker in several years. The dancers were brilliant and vibrant and our seats were close enough to the front that I was able to see the musicians up close. During intermission, I was able to speak to one of the flautists, which was very nice. I definitely would like to go to future performances of the ballet and also attend some of Tchaikovsky's other ballets. It would be interesting as well to see the ballet performed with a larger orchestra, to hear the difference in sound.

**Compositions I liked best:** The pieces I enjoyed the most were: the incidental music during the Christmas party, the Waltz of the Snowflakes, the Dance of the Reed Pipes, the Coffee (Arabian) Dance, and the Waltz of the Flowers. In a way, the pieces are program music, but each piece only tells a little of the story.

The earlier incidental music has frequent repeats before flowing into the next section, but doesn't always echo a theme that was played earlier. The proper dances are much more structured, with clearly defined themes and variations, and ABA forms.

During the scene where Clara's family greet their guests, the mood of the music was light and happy. The jovial theme reflected the joyous nature of the Christmas party. The music changed somewhat as more structured dances began, with a fast section for strings, and then horns. For a few minutes, the music continued the light feeling to be followed by a somber sounding section emphasized by the use of brass and lower strings only. Later on in the scene, as the adults and older children danced together, the music took on a majestic sound and a waltz was performed in 3/4 at a dignified tempo. One little child in the audience was so overwhelmed/taken by the music that when the dance ended he cried out "Yay!" and clapped his hands.

My personal favourite scene from the Nutcracker is the one in which nine or ten beautiful ballerinas dressed in white dance amidst the falling snow. The music for this dance began with the harp playing glittering arpeggios and shimmering glissandi. As the snow began to fall, all of the strings began to pluck gently, with the tempo gradually increasing. At that point, the children's choir appeared from backstage. Dressed entirely in black, the children stood quietly off to one side until the conductor cued them in. They sang a theme that was taken up by the woodwinds in a variation, which was then imitated by the vocalists. The piece ended *f* as the timpani played.

Dance of the Reed Pipes was the next piece I enjoyed. The coordination between the pizzicato in the lower strings and the dance steps was perfectly executed. The flutes had the main themes in this piece; they carried their melody sweetly, playing every single note with perfect precision and grace.

The Arabian Dance was set right after the Dance of the Reed Pipes and in-between the two pieces there was a little extraneous noise from the lower strings. The piece itself started out very quiet with a subdued *poco a poco crescendo*. There was a mysterious sounding solo from the oboe, and then a nice interplay between instruments as the flutes played two notes, then other woodwinds, then brass.

Although the piece was in a minor key for almost the entire duration of the work, it changed to a major key right at the end.

Waltz of the Flowers is a nice example of ABA form as well as theme and variation. This piece opened to flowing glissandi on the harp, then suddenly the main march-like theme burst forth on the horns, followed by the second more lyrical theme on the strings. The first theme then returned on the horns in a variation. That would be A:aba. B began with a sweet melody on the flutes accompanied by the timpani on the repeat. The overall tone colour of this section was very warm. Near the end, the final A section returned with a triumphant *ff*.

The first dance, Waltz of the Snowflakes, always makes me feel very happy. When the children begin to sing, it is very uplifting and leaves me smiling. The colours fitted perfectly to the mood set by the music, and I always feel just a little bit overcome by the absolute beauty of it all. If I were to describe this piece as a candy, it would be like old-fashioned rock candy, the kind that just melts in your mouth, and is incredibly sweet.

Each of these works is very different from the others. One is very loud, evoking images of a march, whereas one is very soft. One sounds exotic and foreign, the other very Russian. Yet their beauty connects them. Listening to the work as a whole is like eating licorice all sorts. It's very sweet, with a darker edge here and there which really enriches the sound.

**Performance of this work:** The entire ballet score was written in the romantic period, and therefore has a romantic atmosphere. However the Nutcracker has different sounds for specific scenes and the whole thing has a pervading Russian flavour.

The conductor was rather interesting to watch. His hand movements were often small and precise, and the orchestra responded to him instantly. He conducted in a happy manner, which came through in the musicians' performances and he did a wonderful job of keeping the ballet dancers in step with the music.

In particular, I noted four instrumentalists. The flutist, the violist, the violinist, and the percussionist. The violist was the only musician who scowled the entire time, but he played very well. The percussionist watched the conductor intently, so as to not miss his cues. When he played the triangle, he handled the instrument in a particularly loving manner.

The violinist put feeling into a particular section that was in a minor key, squeezing her eyes shut, and wincing as if the music was so beautiful that she was about to cry. She really pulled sound out of her instrument. The flutist was very expressive with his face. His eyebrows went up and down to the music, and his eyes were quite animated. He really looked like he was having a lot of fun while playing.

No old instruments were used, but a celeste was played using an electric keyboard. The size of the orchestra was small – 31 musicians including the conductor.

**Overall performance:** The overall performance was excellent. The dancers were very beautiful and smiled the entire time. The conductor did a fabulous job keeping everyone in time, and the instrumentalists played flawlessly. The reduced size of the orchestra worked very well, as it was possible to hear every single colour of each section in minute detail.