

MUSIC ARTS REVIEWS

Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's season opener charms and challenges

by [Jessica Werb](#) on September 28th, 2015 at 12:04 PM

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Vivian Fung and Bramwell Tovey.

At the Orpheum on Saturday, September 26. Continues on September 28

There are some soloists who seem as though they are fighting an orchestra during a performance: pushing or pulling at the tempo, their body furiously pulsing, with nary a glance at their accompanying musicians. Violinist Miriam Fried is not such a player.

Whether she seamlessly adapted to the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's pacing or the orchestra did to hers, a rare

synergy was achieved Saturday night during her performance of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 61* for the opening of the VSO's 2015-16 season.

Fried played as though she considered herself just part of the sum of the whole—a scarce attitude in a profession in which a fair amount of hubris isn't just par for the course, but necessary for success. Before the flourish of the soloist's first bars, she even quietly picked up her instrument and played along with the first violins for a spell, aligning herself with her fellow musicians. When she elegantly launched into the arpeggios of the opening solo passage, she did so facing the concertmaster, rather than the audience, the crystalline sounds of her Stradivarius filling the Orpheum hall.

This first “Allegro, ma non troppo” movement, despite its moments of tension (there's that foreboding, repeated four-note motif that darkens the sweetness), was an exercise in fluidity; the following “Larghetto” was equally so, showcasing Fried's remarkable bow control and poise. The chirpy “Rondo” was a delightful romp, perfectly balanced to the end. As a whole, the performance was a study in effortless precision, and what it may have lacked in fire it gained in tranquility.

This was not the only draw of the evening, however: the world premiere of Vivian Fung's *Biennale Snapshots* opened the second half of the concert. A set of five musical sketches commissioned by the Vancouver Biennale and inspired by artworks in the current outdoor exhibition, the piece both charmed and challenged its audience. The first movement, “Breath Song” (inspired by Sumakshi Singh's work of the same name in Squamish), had the musicians whispering, exhaling, blowing soundlessly through brass and woodwind instruments, and flapping paper—among other techniques. Crucially, this was arranged into a coherent musical shape that engaged rather than alienated. “Tree” (inspired by Konstatin Dimopoulos's multisited *The Blue Trees*) had echoes of Edgard Varèse and his theories of sound masses: a single note in the French horns grows organically into an atmospheric wall of sound, and then a series of overlapping downward glissandos leads into the ending—the players waving their sheet music in the air.

“Graffiti Mashup” (inspired by OSGEMEOS's *Giants* on Granville Island's concrete silos) was a rhythmic cacophony that quoted Tropicalia and hip-hop, while “Interludium: Water Rising” (inspired by Ren Jun's Water sculptures) built wave upon wave of chords swelling and fading, with dizzying glissandos. “Grass” (inspired by Ai Weiwei's *F Grass*) completed the work in an angry and blustery fanfare that pitted loud pedal tones in the brass against piercing woodwinds and frenetic strings.

If Miriam Fried was what everyone was talking about when they arrived at the concert, which also featured brilliant performances of Hector Berlioz's *Le Corsaire*, Op. 21 and Richard Strauss's *Suite From Der Rosenkavalier*, Op. 59, Vivian Fung was all they talked about when they left. And if the show was any indication of what's yet to come from the VSO this season, it's going to be quite a ride.

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