

Music Review

GRAND RAPIDS SYMPHONY in "The Orchestra Olympics," with narrator Brian Diemer, dancers Sandra Dietz and Rodney Bean and the Aerials and Baranis Gymnastics Team. The Family Series concert on Sunday in DeVos Hall was conducted by John Varineau and Gregory Pritchard.

Symphony, guests take flight in Family Series show with an attitude.

It's not unusual for a concert to look like a workout for the musicians.

But the Grand Rapids Symphony's Family Series concert in DeVos Hall on Sunday afternoon nearly was a workout for the audience as well.

After 100 minutes of watching tumblers tumble and dancers dance and hearing a rapper rap and a narrator narrate, I was ready for a nap.

So was my 4-year-old son, Michael. Guess who got to sleep in the car on the way home?

Just once a year in its three-concert Family Series season, the Grand Rapids Symphony produces its own program with local talent, and it's always shown there's no shortage of talent or good ideas in West Michigan.

"The Orchestra Olympics" featured three big pieces with help from members of the community, such as Grand Rapids' own Olympic champ, Brian Diemer, a veteran of three Summer Olympic Games and a past bronze medalist in the 3,000-meter steeplechase.

Sandra Dietz and Rodney Bean from the Grand Rapids Ballet joined the ensemble for Morton Gould's comic tale of "The Jogger and the Dinosaur."

As the young lady who goes out for a run and meets a real live dinosaur, Dietz was charming and perky, with some graceful and spunky moves. Bean, in the big, green dinosaur costume, was nimble on his feet and good for a chuckle.

With "rapping Jon" Varineau narrating the tale, the symphony's conducting fellow, Gregory Pritchard, led the orchestra in his debut performance. With dancers and a narrator, the audience tends not to notice the conductor, but Pritchard gave a solid display of skill handling Gould's rhythmic quirks and lively melodies.

Yet another highlight was Greg Smith's "The Orchestra Games," featuring Diemer as an announcer calling a competition between sections of the orchestra to determine who plays highest, lowest, loudest, softest and the like.

The colorfully orchestrated work serves as something of an introduction to the orchestra, and the dialogue between announcer and a trombone with a cold or a clarinet playing a marathon often is witty as well.

Diemer, neither a musician nor a public speaker, nevertheless gave a thoroughly prepared, highly professional performance as the announcer. Though Varineau was cuing his speeches, Diemer clearly was on top of his game, listening to the music, ready and waiting to deliver his lines.

Equally impressive was the orchestra's stalwart performance of the long work constantly changing in texture, timbre and meter with hardly a moment's rest. Most impressive of all was associate conductor John Varineau's ability to keep narrator and orchestra together on a rather challenging piece.

As Varineau pointed out, it's difficult to fill DeVos Hall with ice and snow for winter sports - not enough room to maneuver the Zamboni, you see - so the orchestra invited members of the Aerials & Baranis Gymnastics Team to display their Summer Olympic gymnastic skills.

To the accompaniment of such music as "Skater's Waltz," the 12 boys and girls twisted and turned on such equipment as the balance beam and trampoline. Though the apparatus was set on the lowered orchestra pit so they were level with the stage floor, the older gymnasts on the trampoline still were bouncing well above Varineau up on the podium, conducting the ensemble.

The concert opened heroically with thrilling heard brass and percussion in the Olympic Fanfare and Theme that John Williams composed for the 1984 Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles. It ended with Williams' theme "Summon the Heroes," which he wrote for the Summer Olympics in Atlanta in 1996.

Though the Grand Rapids Symphony generally draws its highest praise for its Classical Series concerts, sometimes the orchestra really proves its mettle in other situations.

Coming off a busy week of two Classical Series concerts under a guest conductor, on Friday and Saturday, you'd expect the musicians to be tired.

But you wouldn't know it from Sunday's first-rate performance.

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