

CSO honors Nippert, plays sublime concert

7:11 PM, Nov. 22, 2011 Written by Janelle Gelfand

The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra has much to be thankful for, in this turbulent time for the economy and the arts. Monday night's concert in Music Hall, dubbed "CSO gives thanks," was not only a thanks to its loyal audience - evidenced by a substantial crowd, including many families that filled the seats. It was also a love letter to the orchestra's patron, Louise Dieterle Nippert, who turned 100 this year.

The musicians presented Nippert, who sat in her box, with a portrait of her painted by Cincinnati native Jon J Muth, which they commissioned in honor of her 100th birthday.

On Friday, Nippert made a generous gift to the orchestra to fund two pension plans, enabling the extension of its contract with the musicians. Although the amount was undisclosed, it could be up to \$10 million, following her unprecedented gift of \$85 million to the musical arts nearly two years ago.

In addition, the concert, which benefited the musicians' pension fund, was an opportunity to invite back guest conductor Roberto Abbado, as the Cincinnati Symphony searches for a new music director.

Abbado, 56, a native of Milan, Italy, and Claudio Abbado's nephew, made his Music Hall debut in April with a galvanizing performance of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition." He has appeared with many major orchestras and opera companies, and is an artistic partner with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra.

This time, his program was a mixed bag of music that might be deemed "audition" material: A brief motet by Mozart, "Ave verum corpus," featuring the May Festival Chorus; Schumann's Symphony No. 4, Mozart's Sinfonia concertante in E-flat Major with concertmaster Timothy Lees and principal violist Christian Colberg as soloists, and Rossini's popular "William Tell Overture."

Performances were also a bit of a mixed bag, with, at times, less-than-crisp playing by the orchestra. Yet, the evening also provided memorable and engaging moments.

Abbado is an elegant, charismatic leader and he led all but the Sinfonia concertante without a score. With the chorus on risers behind the orchestra, he opened with Mozart's lovely "Ave verum corpus," K. 618, which the composer wrote near the end of his life.

The conductor achieved a sublime mood, with soft dynamics and beautifully felt phrasing. The chorus, prepared by Robert Porco, enunciated the text of this brief choral gem with heartfelt beauty.

Schumann wrote his Symphony No. 4 in D Minor for his wife, Clara's, birthday, and the "Clara theme" can be heard in all four movements. Although it is lyrical, it's a symphony with considerable drama, too.

Abbado caught its emotional intensity, striving for a dark sound and bite in the orchestra. Tempos unfolded naturally, and the conductor pulled back engagingly in the softer, lyrical themes.

The orchestral sound was clear and bright; initially, the balance was a bit loud in the trombones. The fact that the acoustical shell was so far back on the stage (for the first number) may have been the reason for less warmth than usual in the strings.

Highlights included a refined, lyrical "Romanze," with Lees providing filigree on his solo violin, an earthy scherzo and terrific buildup by the brass in the finale. Abbado brought vigor and excitement to the coda, performed with virtuosity by the players.

After intermission, Abbado was an excellent partner in Mozart's Sinfonia concertante, K. 320d. A reduced orchestra was onstage to support their colleagues, Lees and Colberg.

Lees was an animated soloist who propelled the work with spontaneity and warmth, while Colberg, cool and elegant, complemented with a big, effortless sound. They didn't quite strike a balance until the first movement cadenza, in which they breathed and phrased as one. Their dialogue in the slow movement, one of Mozart's most profound, was seamless and deeply moving.

The program ended with "William Tell" (famously used as the theme music for the "Lone Ranger" TV show). Set in the Swiss Alps, the overture includes pastoral and storm music, as well as a galloping "cavalry charge."

Principal cellist Ilya Finkelshteyn's solo with cellos and basses in the opening "Dawn," was stunning. Abbado captured the atmosphere of each mood wonderfully, always with an undercurrent of electricity. Of note were the refined solos by English hornist Christopher Philpotts and flutist Randolph Bowman in the calm after the storm. The exciting playing by the trumpets in the gallop to the finish brought listeners cheering to their feet.