

Vancouver Symphony season bears two disappointments

By MICHAEL QUIGLEY

Disappointment is not a word one has come to associate with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra during the past few years in view of its meteoric string of successes, but the last few months have brought two sizeable disappointments from the VSO.

The first of these stems from the cancellation of the VSO's "modern" music series, Sound Trek, and its replacement by what seems to be a kind of large-scale music appreciation class in the form of a four-concert series titled Musically Speaking.

It is difficult, if not impossible, however, to put the blame for the failure of the Sound Trek series on either the orchestra or its management. The playing has been of a high calibre throughout (though some of the individual pieces have been stinkers), and the powers-that-be have spent just as much time developing and publicizing the modern concerts as they have with their other successful series.

The fact, sad as it may be, seems to be that Vancouver audiences are just not interested in supporting modern symphonic music. Since the equally

unsuccessful Sounds of the Century series in the 60's, audiences have turned out in less than droves for modern concerts. The most successful of the Sound Trek series was that two seasons ago featuring Aaron Copland, while the remainder have averaged about a thousand patrons apiece.

The demise of Sound Trek will leave a big gap in the local music scene as well as the VSO's programs next year (the latter especially since the Main Series was planned and announced before the cancellation of the modern concerts). Hopefully future VSO seasons will attempt to sneak a few modern works into programs, though the amount of rehearsal time required for the more difficult of these will doubtless be an inhibiting factor.

Whether the replacement series will be a success is anyone's guess. According to a VSO source, many requests have come in to the Society's offices for a series where the music is "explained" to the audiences. (Ironically, the Sound Trek series could have benefited from this kind of treatment, especially in view of the skimpy program notes offered at these concerts.

One of the Musically

Speaking concerts, on October 8, purports to offer an evening of all-Impressionist music, and contains Saint-Saens "Second Piano Concerto", which series host, Harry Adaskin, will have a tough time justifying as an Impressionist work. Also on this program is Ravel's "G Major Piano Concerto," to be heard in 1976 as part of the VSO's Great Composers Series.

On the more positive side, the final Musically Speaking concert on December 13 will feature former VSO music director Meredith Davies conducting and talking about Tradition in Music, using three seldom-heard works to illustrate his points: Richard Rodney Bennett's "Piano Concerto," "The Perfect Fool" ballet music by Holst, and "In the South" by Elgar.

The second disappointment is in the programs announced for the VSO's main series, labelled "A Masterpiece Season." Of the 36 works to be played, three are from the classical period, three are impressionist, and eight are modern (assuming Walton and Kabalevsky can be considered "modern"). The remaining 22 works, or slightly over 60 per cent of the total, are from the era that Vancouver audiences seem to love the best, the Romantic era.

Fans of the 20th century avant-garde will have a dreary time at the main series concerts. Stravinsky's "Song of the Nightingale" (dating from 1919) is on the same program as (gasp) Tchaikovsky's "First Piano Concerto" and (zzzzz) Brahms' "Fourth Symphony." Webern's "Six Orchestra Pieces" (a really modern work - dating from 1909!) shares a bill with Chopin, Liszt and Beethoven.

At least there is "Fragmentations" by Vancouver composer Alex Pauk to look forward to, as well as "Shen-Yu" by Ming Yueh Liang. And "Dance Suite" by Japanese composer Roh Ogura is hardly a work to send VSO audiences scurrying for the exits.

Overall, the VSO main

series boasts a fair amount of variety, but there is also a fair amount of repetition. There are several pieces heard within recent memory: Brahms' "First Piano Concerto," Rachmaninoff's "Third Piano Concerto," Walton's "First Symphony," Beethoven's "Fourth Concerto," Ravel's "Daphnis and Chloe Suite No. 2." Akiyama is even playing a work he has conducted here before - Brahms' "Symphony No. 2."

As for works that could be performed, but aren't... Well, whatever happened to the Sibelius cycle which Akiyama seemed to be starting a few seasons ago with his performances of the first and second symphonies? What about Nielsen, Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Vaughan Williams, just to mention composers of this century? Or Janacek? Or American composers like Copland and Ives? Or Schumann and Schubert? Or some of the lesser known works of Respighi?

The list, needless to say, goes on and on...