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The Delaware Symphony Orchestra presents ‘Alpha and Omega’ Endings and beginnings

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The Delaware Symphony gave a bracing and beautifully played concert on January 25 at Wilmington’s Grand Opera House. Maestro David Amado conducted *Alpha and Omega* — a program featuring a trio of firsts and lasts — and, as he often does, curated the works in a thoughtful arc that traveled back and forth in time.



Soprano Mary Wilson performed Richard Strauss’s ‘Four Last Songs’ with DSO. (Image courtesy of the artist.)

Winter dreams

The evening’s major work (the second half) was *Symphony No. 1 in G Minor* by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893). Begun in 1866, when the 25-year-old was a fledgling professor at the soon-to-become Moscow Conservatory, it premiered in 1868. In 1874 Tchaikovsky substantially revised the work and titled it *Winter Dreams*.

Its first two (of four) movements have descriptive titles. “Daydreams on a Winter Journey” opens with dramatic unison writing for strings both high and low. After the energy of the first movement, “Land of Gloom, Land of Mist” creates a reflective mood, especially in elegiac solo passages for oboe and flute. It’s followed by a bouncy, syncopated scherzo that morphs into a gliding waltz, and the orchestra smoothly followed every musical twist.

The fourth-movement finale features many nascent Tchaikovsky musical signatures. It’s replete with sweeping melodic lines, dramatic shifts in tone and texture, a mini-fugue for strings, and a rousing conclusion that unleashes brass and percussion. Throughout, however, Amado found unexpected (and welcome) balancing moments of stillness.

Last songs

Closing the evening's first half was arguably the program's best-known work — the beautiful and justly famous *Four Last Songs* (*Vier letzte Lieder*) by Richard Strauss (1864-1949). These were not only his last songs; written in 1948, they were his final compositions, so they carry extra emotional resonance. Strauss loved the high voice (his wife was a soprano), and in this cycle he set four German poems that caught his late-in-life imagination: “Früling” (Spring), “September,” “Beim Schlafengehen” (While Falling Asleep), and “Im Abendrot” (At Dusk) — the first three by Hermann Hesse, the fourth by Joseph von Eichendorff.

Amado enlisted acclaimed American soprano Mary Wilson for these iconic songs, a touchstone for singers. Surprisingly, this was Wilson's first time performing them, something certainly not apparent in her radiant and rich interpretation. The cycle moves from lyrical evocation of spring (“Life's own sweetness returned again”) to life's end. “Im Abendrot” opens in the peace of evening (“dusk comes, the vales exploring”) but closes with a disturbing question: “Can this perhaps be death?” To heighten the finale, Strauss quotes his own tone poem *Death and Transfiguration*.



Bracing and beautiful: the Delaware Symphony Orchestra. (Photo by Joe del Tufo.)

Wilson rose to the vocal and dramatic challenges of this demanding work — not really a soprano solo with accompaniment, but a duet (almost a concerto). Sometimes the orchestra covered her exceptionally beautiful voice — after all, it's one person partnered with 80 instruments. But she sang with perfect poise, ever-unfolding depth, and admirable vocal restraint, never attempting to dominate — something that might tempt a lesser artist.

A surprising ride

The evening opened with *Night Ride and Sunrise*, a lesser-known descriptive work by Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) that took the audience by surprise. In pre-concert remarks, Amado noted that while Strauss worked in traditional forms and expanded them with new harmonics, here Sibelius was seeking new ways to create by exploring new forms.

This midcareer work of Nordic impressionism develops in a generative way. Rather than featuring recurring themes that tie up musical loose ends, the tone poem uses each motif to develop something new and ends in a very different musical place from its opening.

The piece begins with galloping rhythms — is it a sleigh ride or someone on horseback? Orchestra sections often play in unison, then peel off to expose musical ideas happening underneath, like the haunting folk-style refrain that rises out of the six minutes of sustained *ostinato* beginning the work. It's a composition filled with imagination, exploration, and mystery — and modernism.

Sibelius wrote *Night Ride* in 1908, but it's astoundingly forward-looking, seeming to stretch time through repetition in a way that presages seminal 20th-century composers like Philip Glass. It was thrilling and fascinating to hear this work inviting the audience inside the music for a ride that was magical, even spiritual — and totally unexpected.

