Symphony ‘drama’ lacks precision

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If the Monday night concert of the Houston Symphony wasn’t inspiring, it was certainly educational — from the standpoint of both content and performance.

Throughout the concert, Sir John Barbarolli’s tendency of conducting for dramatic effect rather than precision came through, often to the detriment of the music.

The program began with a performance of Beethoven’s Egmont Overture, a powerful work which carries as its message the struggle for freedom from oppression. The middle sections were all very polished and well-played. But the opening and closing parts were imprecise, detracting noticeably from the whole performance.

Lack of Content

Next followed Frederick Delius’ tone poem ‘A Song of Summer.’ The work is a relaxed succession of crescendos and diminuendos, pleasant to listen to, but with little content. Impressionistic in conception, it is rather restrained and unemotional. The work was the best performed piece of the evening.

The soloist for the evening was violinist Hugo Kolberg and the concerto was the rarely played Piston Violin Concerto. This concerto isn’t currently available on records. That’s too bad, but on the other hand, Monday night’s performance wasn’t one that would motivate many of the audience to run out and buy a copy if it were.

No Communication

The first movement was conceived as a dialogue between soloist and orchestra, but unfortunately there was no communication. The slow second movement was not noteworthy, but mercifully short. The third movement was typical Piston: clever, inventive, and pretty good—but not good enough to make amends for the first two.

The final work of the evening was the melodious Dvorak Symphony No. 7 in D Minor.

One can’t help but contrast the Delius and Piston pieces with the Dvorak symphony. The first two composers knew exactly how to say what they wanted to, but had little to say. Dvorak, however, had so much to say, but lacked technical polish. As a result, his orchestrations are sometimes bulky and a little long.

Sir John overconducted the symphony. I think the score calls for control in order to bring clarity to the piece. Instead, Barbarolli played the dynamic tempo changes for all they were worth, vividly dramatizing each rise and fall in dynamics. The effect was one of muddying the potentially clear stream.