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Concert has everything but a crowd

By Joe Matyas, Free Press Arts & Entertainment Reporter

The only jarring thing about Orchestra London's Masterworks concert at Centennial Hall last night was the poor attendance.

The orchestra, currently fighting the possibility of bankruptcy with a special fund-raising campaign, could have received a big boost with a full use for a program of well-played, eminently listenable music by English composers Benjamin Britten, Edward Elgar and Norwegian Edvard Grieg.

Instead, the Wellington Street barn was half full, prompting conductor Brian Jackson to turn pitchman.

"Tell your friends they missed a great concert tonight," he said from the conductor's podium. "I think it was worth the price of admission just to hear Valerie play the first movement of Grieg's concerto."

Valerie Tryon did, indeed, fill the bill as guest soloist with a splendid rendering of Grieg's piano concerto in A minor.

The British pianist, now artist-in-residence at McMaster University in Hamilton and a member of the Rembrandt Piano Trio in Toronto, deftly explored the shifting moods and nuances of the piece with both a tender soft touch and heavy hands for emphasis.

It was precisely what the performance required, considering that Grieg's concerto doesn't pose the same kind of dexterous challenge of works like Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto or Rachmaninoff's third.

It's an accomplishment to be able to play those pieces technically well, but that's not good enough for Grieg's concerto.

Because it's not nearly as technically tough, Grieg's piece becomes impressive only when a skilled performer has given everything possible to expression, something Tryon did.

She has an excellent reputation as a pianist who knows her way around Romantic works and it was plainly evident by the exquisitely expressive sounds she produced.

Despite his penchant for shorter works, Grieg is widely considered the most important composer produced by Norway and one of the early exponents of the practice of using folk melodies as the basis for creating symphonic music with a national flavour.

In the early 19th century, when German composers were the undisputed stars of the classical music world, England was regarded throughout Europe as a country without any great symphonic music.

Its roster of notables still isn't long, but definitely includes Elgar, who straddled the 18th and 20th centuries, and Britten, who rose to prominence in the middle of the 20th century with a string of operas, choral works, chamber music and orchestral works.

Orchestra London was less than convincing in performing the four sea interludes from Britten's most famous opera, Peter Grimes, as an overture, but gave every indication it believed in the value of Elgar's Enigma Variations as an orchestral masterwork.

After Henry Purcell in the 17th century, England waited 200 years for its next composer of consequence -- Elgar. It's a pity there weren't more people at Centennial Hall to enjoy one of his best works.

The poor attendance makes a fan ask the dreaded question: Can live classical music survive in London?

Right now it looks as if the orchestra can dodge the bankruptcy bullet. It has raised \$250,000 of the \$360,000 it needs by the end of this month to avoid collapse.

IF YOU GO

What: Guest soloist Valerie Tryon performs Edvard Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor with Orchestra London and conductor Brian Jackson. Benjamin Britten's four sea interludes from Peter Grimes and Edward Elgar's Enigma Variations are also on the Masterworks program.

When: 8 p.m., tonight.

Where: Centennial Hall, London.

Tickets: \$20 to \$35 each, call 679-8778 to reserve.