Music Review: Worcester Symphonic Project puts young musicians in spotlight

There’s much to admire about the Worcester Symphonic Project, an ad hoc ensemble made up, quite literally, of musicians of all ages. Comprising a mix of local players – some professional, some amateur, some college students, and some younger – the WSP presented its annual concert at Mechanics Hall on Sunday afternoon, playing Beethoven’s Symphony No. 1 and Schubert’s Mass in G. For both of those works, it was joined by the WPI Orchestra, which also gave its own performance of Schubert’s Symphony no. 8.

Founded by Peter Sulski and now in its fourth season, the WSP is designed to provide local instrumentalists the opportunity to get together and present large-scale concerts in a world-class hall.

“It’s the participatory aspect that’s most important,” Sulski said during the WSP’s first performance in 2013, and that element was palpable on Sunday. Some familiar faces dotted the orchestra – notably Sulski and a few of his Worcester Chamber Music Society colleagues – but there were many others, covering a wide spectrum of ages and abilities; together they played with much enthusiasm in the concert presented by Music Worcester.

Of course, one doesn’t go into a concert like Sunday’s expecting performances of technical perfection. This one had its moments of problematic intonation. Dynamics, generally, could have been more widely exaggerated: the finale of Beethoven’s First Symphony, after all, gets much of its life force from the manic interplay of passages alternating loud and soft, and it would have been nice to have had some greater variety in that area on Sunday.

Transitions in the Schubert and Beethoven symphonies were sometimes rough and there were moments – admittedly in some of these scores’ trickier spots – when the string playing was tentative and thin-sounding.

That said, the broad strokes of each piece on the program came across clearly. Tempos were always appropriate, never dragging. Rhythmically, the ensembles’ playing was alive and locked in. And a number of subtle details came over well, too.

The WPI orchestra, led by its director, Douglas Weeks, brought a burnished majesty to the striding, march-like theme in the finale of Schubert’s “Unfinished” Symphony. In that piece, too, there were a series of fine, round-toned dialogues between principal oboe Jeff Porzio and principal clarinet Brett Ammeson.

The trio of the Beethoven Symphony’s scherzo buzzed – the whole movement was taken at a nice, brisk clip by conductor Bruce Hangen – featuring violin runs of tight unity and flying energy. There was a real elemental power in the closing pages of that piece’s first movement, too.

In between the orchestral selections came the Schubert Mass, in which instrumentalists from the WSP were joined by the Holy Cross College Choir and members of the Worcester Chorus.

Eric Culver, who directs the Holy Cross Chamber Orchestra, led a touching performance of this flowing, lyrical piece. The “Kyrie” sang warmly while the “Gloria” and “Credo” both packed a nice bite. The piece’s three soloists – soprano Laurel Mehaffey, tenor Adam Ouellet and bass David Harris – each acquitted themselves well. Mehaffey was a standout, singing with pleasing, clarion tone and crisp diction. Ouellet also did himself well: quality tenors, young and old, are a rare commodity, and his strong singing in the Mass marked him as one.

The WSP was at its best in this score, too. Even though much of the orchestral writing is accompanimental, there are plenty of exposed places and not a little precariously, unison writing. The ensemble didn’t shy away from any of it, but played with much confidence and, often, uniform articulation and tone.

In hindsight, it was perhaps appropriate that this biggest work on the program (at least in terms of numbers of performers on stage) proved the afternoon’s highpoint: it put the communal focus at the heart of the WSP’s mission front and center and did it proud.