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BCO a delight to the ear

by Dan Wolfe

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The latest concert by the Burlington Chamber Orchestra, held in the Redstone Recital Hall at UVM was a smashing success. Under the baton of Music Director Michael Hopkins, they not only provided secure accompaniment for the young Russian cellist Sergey Antonov, they added a real jewel of a symphony by Haydn.

Antonov is a propulsive, somewhat combative young cellist with a huge set of technical skills and interesting musical thought. Both of these aspects of his musical personality/playing came through in his performance of the Variations on a Rocooco Theme, op. 33, by Tchaikovsky. It was technically brilliant, and the final section was played with a bravura and certainty that allowed a breakneck tempo.

Other variations were quite lyrical and contained a long chant lié line. At one point, then the cello was in dialogue with the orchestra, Antonov would play his bit and then swiftly look at the first violinist as though to say: 'match that... if you can', which added a certain edge to the entire performance. The audience responded passionately to the performance.

The program I had opened with a concerto grosso by Handel, the Opus 6, No. 6, which was beautifully played by this orchestra. It is a wonderful work and the fifth from this opus number that the chamber orchestra has essayed to play.

The real jewel of the evening was Haydn's Symphony no. 6 "Le Matin". Here is the composer who invented the Symphony form or solidified its growth, beginning a symphony with a sunrise, however brief, and working on to tempo changes and form changes to an allegro finale, using materials that were available to any composer at the time, but which Haydn used in definitive, creative ways that created challenges for the composers who followed him. The performance was impeccable, bringing this young but very exciting and already indispensable group of musicians and its conductor to a permanent place in the Burlington musical hierarchy.

Burlington Choral Society

In the Ira Allen Chapel at the University of Vermont, Burlington Choral Society presented its annual fall/winter concert. The mainstay was the Mass in D. minor, sometimes referred to as the "Lord Nelson Mass", by Josef Haydn. Also on the program was a Mozart motet, Alma Dei Creatoris. K. 277 and the Serenade in G. K. 525 (Eine Kleine Nachtmusik).

As a general comment, there were times when things seemed uneasy between the conductor, David Neiweem, who is the Music Director and Conductor for the group. For example, the opening of the third movement of the Serenade was untidy, in part due to slow page turns by the members of the orchestra string sections. The soloists for the Haydn Mass also at various times seemed uncomfortable either with the music or with the physical distance between them and Neiweem -- an appreciable distance in the Ira Allen Chapel. In fact, the tenor soloist, Daniel Marcy, and the baritone Larry Rudiger, seemed much more secure than the two female soloists, Lisa Wolff and Evelyn Kwanza, soprano and mezzo-soprano in that order. Wolff, whose voice reminded me somewhat of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf -- a certain sharp, fast spinning sound --

seemed very uncomfortable. Kwanza, who has a more lush sound, seemed to have a very short breath span.

The chorus performed well in the Haydn Mass -- with one or two minor slightly-late entrances. The Alma Dei was more unsatisfactory. It probably works best within the liturgical setting, because it was undoubtedly followed by some chanting immediately upon the last notes of the motet's dying fall; without that, the work is a great and at times complicated work whose close is anticlimactic and somewhat unsatisfying in a concert performance. It spends a great deal of time repeating the brief text to no particular effect.

All in all, the performance was not one of the notable or memorable concerts that this fine group has demonstrated under Neiveem in the past.

They will present Parts II and III of Messiah in May 2009.

Cinema 9

The fourth installment of operas from the Met in H.D. took place at Cinema 9 Nov. 22 (I'm not certain of the capacity of Cinema 3 in which the viewing took place, but 157 ticketholders saw the performance according to the young lady of home I made inquiry.)

Although the work presented, *La Damnation de Faust* by Hector Berlioz, has enjoyed a long history of concert performances, it is seldom staged. This production, the joint creative venture of James Levine, conductor, and Robert Lepage, *mise en scene*, had moments of transcendence, and at least one moment that was far from transcendent.

Tenor Marcello Giordani, a competent tenor but hardly inspired, had one moment that I bet he wishes wasn't photographed: his reaching for two of the highest notes in the part, and being charitable, let us say he almost didn't make them, but he did manage to make quite a face.

Susan Graham had all of the proper ideas and local control in place as Marguerite, the young woman whom Faust seduces, simultaneously giving her a potion to put her mother to sleep so she will not wake up while they are together. Because, however, she thus fails to show up again and again, the cumulative effect of the potion is the death of Marguerite's mother, for which she is thrown into prison, and for whom there is absolution.

John Relyea was a brilliant Mephistopheles, singing his Song of the Flea and his scurrilous talent outside Margarita's house with great relish, and driving forward the action. He was a gifted actor as well as the possessor of a great bass voice.

Scenic effects were very magical, especially the firefly section. The use of honeycomb-type staging must be much on the minds of the stage directors at the Met, because their production of *Dr. Atomic* utilized a similar device. The orchestra under Levine played with all the grace, beauty and force that one has come to expect from Levine and the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra.

All in all: a great performance.

Burlington resident Dan Wolfe observes and critiques the local arts scene for the Times Sentinel. His column appears weekly.