

“Symphony Nearly Flawless”

Nov 21 2009

The Okanagan Symphony presented its second concert of the season last Friday night at the Community Theatre. Titled “Masters of Melody”, it more than lived up to the name.

The program was full of contrasts, spanning nearly 250 years, featuring Mozart, Schubert and Toronto composer, Michael Colgrass. The orchestra performed admirably in each genre.

The Colgrass, titled “The Schubert Birds”, was commissioned by the National Arts Orchestra in 1989; it is loosely based on an obscure Schubert Waltz. I am a staunch lover of contemporary music, particularly by Canadian composers and I found this to be most interesting, full of mood changes, complex melodies and rhythms along with lush chords. There was always an overtone of dissonance, sometimes more pronounced than others. From an almost ethereal start, the composition moves through many simulated bird calls along with atonal melodies moving in fourths and fifths, all supported by the lower strings, which were especially mellow. Each section had moments of prominence – wonderful mallet work from percussion, full bodied strings and tightly woven woodwinds and reeds. The Oboe and Double Bassoon were especially fine in their solo work. The orchestra in general was nearly flawless and interpreted the music well; however, I found that some of the writing, although complex and creative, seemed to lose focus. Many of the mood changes seemed almost like special effects, rather than an integral part of the whole. At times I wasn’t sure where the composer was going, but at the end, Colgrass returned us to the ethereal mood of the start. I applaud the Symphony for bringing this music to us, and hope to hear more. Indeed, I would like to hear the Colgrass several times to get all of the nuances of it.

The music of Mozart is unmistakable, full of grace, charm, wit and joy. Whenever I hear his music played well, I feel elated, and the Orchestra delivered! The players captured all that Mozart has to offer, complete with delicate phrasing, impeccable bowing and dynamics. The soloists – Heidi Krutzen, Harp and Lorna Mc Ghee, flute, both from Vancouver, were outstanding. They captured the style completely and made it sound simple. They tackled the virtuoso passages with ease, playing as one. Many passages required complete unison of notes, and they always delivered. Their cadenzas were full of vigor and warmth. This coupled with the overall musicality of their playing gave us a memorable experience.

After intermission, we were treated to a Schubert Symphony, his number 3, in D major. Once again, the orchestra demonstrated their versatility and mastery of many styles. From the dramatic opening to the lilting melodies, explosive chords, driving rhythms and precision playing, they were in complete control. The very opening of the second movement seemed a little tentative but that was soon under control with smooth transitions between movements.

The entire evening was an emotional high, due largely to the expressive conducting of Rosemary Thomson, which, at times, left me breathless. She communicates with the players and audience with spectacular results. Kudos to Ms. Thomson for her ability to not only conduct, but to bring out the best in everyone, and kudos to all the players for their musicianship.

Marvin Dickau is an Organist, Pianist and Conductor who has an A.Mus. from the University of Alberta. He has conducted choirs and small orchestras, given solo piano and organ recitals and accompanied many singers and instrumentalists in Kelowna and Calgary.