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SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL REPORT

'Coming to America' Festival: Gerard Schwarz, cond., soloists, Seattle Symphony, University of Washington Chorale, Benaroya Hall, Seattle, 29.5-7.6.2007 (BJ)

Towards the end of the Seattle Symphony's regular season, music director Gerard Schwarz has developed the agreeable practice of offering a few concerts grouped around a specific topic. This time around, works by composers who had come to the United States from other countries were featured in four programs: two full-scale orchestral programs, each given twice, framed a chamber concert performed by ensembles drawn from the Seattle Symphony and other sources, and a pre-concert presentation by the University of Washington Wind Ensemble before one of the orchestral programs.

Other commitments prevented me from attending this last, but the rest of the festival provided stimulating listening and a number of outstanding performances. Both of the orchestral programs were supplemented by visual elements. On the opening evening, after Martinç's Third Symphony and Korngold's Violin Concerto, the *Genesis Suite*, consisting of movements by Schoenberg, Nathaniel Shilkret, Alexandre Tansman, Milhaud, Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Ernst Toch, and Stravinsky, was performed under a set of stainless-steel mesh scrims that carried constantly shifting abstract images from paintings by the celebrated local glass artist Dale Chihuly. Prepared in collaboration with his videographer, Peter West, these often beautiful and evocative images helped, I confess, to bring interest some prevailingly characterless music. As distinct from the trademark ugliness of Schoenberg's Prelude, and the pulsating *Symphony-of-Psalms*-style rhythms of Stravinsky's concluding *Babel*, there is not much in the movements by Shilkret, who masterminded the project in 1944, and the other four composers he recruited for the enterprise to distinguish one from another. The orchestra played with customary skill, the University of Washington Chorale sang a trifle vaguely, and the narration was delivered in heavily amplified sound by F. Murray Abraham and Patty Duke with suitably melodramatic force.

Altogether more satisfyingly musical to my ears was the first half of the concert. Martinç's Third, one of the least often heard of his six fine symphonies, drew a passionately committed reading under Schwarz's baton, and Stefan Jackiw, already an artist to reckon with at the age of 23, lavished sumptuous tone and immaculate technique on the Korngold Violin Concerto, which also deserves more performances than it receives. Prevailingly lush and romantic in inspiration, the music, which Korngold adapted and elaborated in 1945 from several of his film scores, casts an interesting comparative light—or rather shadow—on the concerto Samuel Barber wrote for the instrument a few years earlier. In Barber's more familiar work, it has always seemed to me that the bravura elements clash damagingly with the gorgeous principal theme of the first movement: it is as if the composer had suddenly thought, "Well, this is supposed to be a concerto—I'd better put some brilliant stuff in." Korngold's main theme is gorgeous too, but he is much more successful in blending lyricism with virtuosity, and Jackiw and the orchestra realized both elements with compelling intensity.

For the festival's chamber concert, Schwarz assembled works by Henry Brant (a relatively short-distance immigrant, since he was born in Canada), Joël-François Durand, Samuel Adler, Stefan Wolpe, Jovino Santos Neto, and Henri Lazarof. I found Lazarof's Piano Quartet, which was receiving its world premiere, the most rewarding of the six pieces played. In this 2007 work, the Bulgarian-born composer explores often hushed dynamic levels to considerable poetic effect, bringing his last movement to a surprising but satisfying soft conclusion, and the performance by violinist Maria Larionoff, violist Mara Gearman, Julian Schwarz—a 17-year-old cellist of limitless potential—and pianist Kimberly Russ seemed equally satisfying, though I speak without having seen the score. Aside from the textural interest of Brant's *Angels and Devils*, which set Scott Goff's polished solo flute playing off against the background of an accomplished flute choir from Bonnie Blanchard's studio, and the bracing effect, in Adler's *Canto IX*, of timpani and roto toms played by Jonathan Fox, a talented and charmingly personable percussionist, the rest of the program sounded as short of musical character as that *Genesis Suite*—quite clearly, coming to America is no guarantee of creative enhancement. Durand's *In the Mirror Land*, for flute and clarinet, spoke the *lingua franca* of conventional modernism; Santos Neto's *Sertão Carioca* drew only intermittent life from a variety of Brazilian idioms; and though Wolpe's Piece for Trumpet and Seven Instruments was played splendidly by David Gordon and an ensemble from the Seattle Youth Symphony Orchestra under Schwarz's direction, I have never understood the esteem in which this composer's unimpeachably serious but almost unrelievedly drab music is widely held—to me, it bears the fatal imprint of late-20th-century *avant-dérrière-garde* sterility.

The final orchestral program paired the Brecht-Weill *Mahagonny* Songspiel with Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra, which latter thus concluded the festival on a level of musical inspiration equal to that of its opening. *Mahagonny* was staged in a production by Sergei Tschernisch, president of Cornish College of the Arts, whose faculty—and student Aleah Chapin—provided set design, technical assistance, and visuals projected on a screen above the stage. The idea of doing it this way in the concert hall was worth trying, but not entirely successful: the sung English text was very hard to understand, since Weill's incisive scoring tended to drown out the singers, with the notable exceptions of Margaret Gawrysiak, an impressive mezzo-soprano from the Seattle Opera's Young Artists program, and baritone Michael Drumheller. And a program note that omitted any mention of the work that the Songspiel eventually morphed into—the three-act opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*—culpably failed to set the piece in context for the interested reader.

Striking the set amounted to a veritable concerto for the stage crew, who carried it (and the furniture) off with disciplined skill, and then we came to the real musical meat of the evening. This was a genuinely thrilling performance of Bartók's celebrated concerto. Conductors are sometimes inclined to underline the romantic inclinations of the piece by heightening its sonorities, but Schwarz opted for a more fine-drawn sound, emphasizing the organic strength and stylistic probity of the music without shortchanging its charm. His musicians played it like the world-class virtuoso orchestra he has shaped them into. Not one of the many telling details in the score was missed—witness, for example, the contrasted phrases of the brass section in the *Giucoco delle coppie* second movement, which many a conductor glosses over, but to which Schwarz's hands brought ideal clarity. It was a dazzling conclusion to a festival of modest but illuminating scope.

Bernard Jacobson

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