



Entertainment

Philharmonic beautiful, but program tedious

Review

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The Riverside County Philharmonic sounded better Saturday than it ever has in the almost 30 years I have been following it. The strings were warm and sensuous, the woodwinds were delightfully precise, and the brass was powerful and accurate.

Under the direction of guest conductor Barry Jekowsky, all of the sections meshed together seamlessly in the opening concert of the orchestra's 49th season at Riverside's Municipal Auditorium.

But there was a fly in the ointment. There were eight separate works (or excerpts thereof) scheduled. Add to that the playing of the national anthem at the beginning and an encore featuring Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" at the end, and there were 10 selections altogether. And between most of them, there was extensive preparation -- moving personnel around and rearranging furniture on the stage, plus tuning.

The program was titled "Music to Smile About," but by the end of the evening the grin was starting to feel a bit forced.

The featured soloist was Deborah Avery, the orchestra's principal clarinetist. She was magnificent in both Copland's Clarinet Concerto and John Williams' "Viktor's Tale" from the movie "The Terminal."

Copland's concerto is one of his more astringent pieces. The Spartan accompaniment consists of strings, piano and harp. It is not warm and fuzzy, but it provides ample opportunities for virtuosic demonstrations, and Avery made the most of them.

Her tones were crisp and clear throughout the instrument's range, and she delivered several intricate runs impressively.

The short Williams piece, on the other hand, let Avery demonstrate that she can deliver emotional expressiveness to match her technical mastery.

Among the other highlights of the evening were fine solo sections by Concertmaster Ilana Setapen in

"Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks"; plenty of rousing climaxes by the brass in "Night on Bald Mountain" and "Till Eulenspiegel"; a magical moment in "Lieutenant Kije" when the orchestra sounded like a music box led by keyboardist John Sawoski on celesta; and several wonderful passages throughout the evening by the flutes, led by principal Eileen Holt.

The Philharmonic is a powerful, well-oiled music machine. But a program like this lacks focus. There was no single major work to anchor it. (The concerto and the Williams piece together lasted a little over 20 minutes in a concert that spanned almost two hours.) It was like serving a long series of appetizers with no main course.

And with all the pauses for realignment and tuning (and Jekowsky's big entrance to applause before each piece), it began to feel exhausting.

In his pre-concert talk, Jekowsky served notice that the works would be performed in a different order than in the published program. It would have helped if he had announced at the beginning of each piece what was being played (or perhaps the titles could have been flashed on the two large video screens at each side of the stage).

Some people were probably left wondering what they were hearing, so here are the works in the order they were performed: Mussorgsky, "Night on Bald Mountain"; Copland, Clarinet Concerto; Williams, "Viktor's Tale"; Vivaldi, Concerto for Strings in A, RV 158; Prokofiev, selections from "Lieutenant Kije Suite"; Bright Sheng, "Black Swan"; Debussy, two of the "Three Nocturnes"; and Strauss, "Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks."

All of the pieces received expressive, enthusiastic readings.

A large number of people dashed for the doors as "Stars and Stripes Forever" ended, before the lights came up. I'm guessing they weren't taking any chances -- they feared something else might be coming.

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