

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

March 30, 2015

Review: Spokane Symphony journeys to the Mideast

Larry Lapidus
Correspondent

Recordings

Critic Larry Lapidus has rounded up his list of essential recordings of the works performed this past weekend by the Spokane Symphony:

1. Mohammed Fairouz, "Tahrir."
UCLA Philharmonia/David Krakower, clarinet, conducted by Neal Stulberg. (Sono Luminus)
2. Leonard Bernstein, "Chichester Psalms." New York Philharmonic/Camerata Singers, conducted by Leonard Bernstein. (CBS/Sony)

The power of music to bridge gaps, fuse opposites and transmute differences into commonalities was the focus of this past weekend's concerts by the Spokane Symphony in its home at the Martin Woldson Theater at the Fox. Responding no doubt to the current flux of fears and anxieties surrounding events in countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, Eckart Preu, the orchestra's music director, turned to composers with roots in that area for three of the four works on the program: Tehran-born Behzad Ranjbaran, Egyptian-American Mohammed Fairouz and Leonard Bernstein, who, though born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, felt that, as a Jew, his origins were in Israel.

"Angeles de Llama y Hielo" ("Angels of Fire and Ice"), composed in 1994 by Mexican composer Ana Lara seems at first to be at odds with the other pieces on the program, since neither its composer nor its subject has a direct connection with any current sect, nationality or dispute. In fact, that is exactly the point. Lara's powerful evocation of four Angels (Darkness, Dawn, Light and Sunset) symbolizes stages in a cycle that underlies all of human life. The music thus puts us in touch with forces that dwarf mankind's petty quarrels.

Avoiding any national or ethnic traits, Lara imagines huge orchestral sonorities, representing the inexorable, endlessly repeating cycles which are her subject. Starting with a single, low pitch in the brass and strings, the piece depicts the gathering of energy through striking combinations of swooping glissandi in strings and harp, twittering woodwinds, booming percussion and nattering figurations in the brass. When it finally subsided into silence, one felt a glimpse had been granted behind the curtain of creation.

Little such originality appears in Ranjbaran's "Seven Passages," composed in 2000. Though the program of the piece is enticing, involving, as it does, heroes, demons and blinded monarchs, its conventional harmonic vocabulary and predictable use of instrumental effects produced an impression that was pleasant, but bland. The orchestra was not to blame, however, as they negotiated Ranjbaran's demanding score with eye-popping virtuosity.

Their commitment was more rewardingly applied to the brilliant score of "Tahrir," in which Fairouz's stimulating use of controlled dissonance and highly energized orchestral detail creates a portrait of a society rich in creative activity, in which motifs of Arab and African origin jostle with and embrace elements of Klezmer, a style arising from European Jewish life in the 19th century. The clarinet is the traditional leader of a Klezmer ensemble, and so Fairouz uses it to represent the part Jewish culture might play in a free, open Middle Eastern culture.

The orchestra's associate principal clarinet, Daniel Cotter, was the soloist. In his preconcert remarks, he described the tremendous effort required to master the composer's demands for stratospheric high notes and complex rhythmic patterns. In these, he succeeded admirably, bringing a roar of approval from the audience and a bow of gratitude from the conductor. One hopes that, as time goes on, he will be able to acquire more of the distinctive attributes of Klezmer style, which is distinct from that of classical clarinet, and which involves note "bending" and coloration that would be out of place in Mozart, but which are vital in allowing "Tahrir" to make its full effect.

The program not only ended, but culminated in a performance of Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms," which achieves more completely than any of the other works the ideal of cultural accommodation and interdependence, leading to the ideal of peace both for humanity and for the tormented soul of the composer. Bernstein's style is famously eclectic, incorporating elements of both classical and popular traditions into a style that is unmistakably his own.

All these elements can be discerned in "Chichester Psalms." The percussion section, which was kept on its augmented toes throughout the evening, swept brilliantly through Bernstein's sudden shifts in rhythm and dynamics, while the strings had to move rapidly from their own percussive effects to passages of haunting and ethereal beauty.

Still, chief responsibility for success in the work rests on the chorus and on the male

soprano soloist, which part was taken by Amiel Elfert, a remarkable fifth-grader from Spokane, who sang with purity and beauty of tone, immaculate diction and rhythmic accuracy. The audience listened as though under a spell, as they did to the magnificent singing by the Spokane Symphony Chorale, here performing in Hebrew. The sudden interjections and stirring exhortations of Part 1 went flawlessly, allowing us to concentrate on the power of the music, rather than its difficulty. A trio of sopranos featured in Bernstein's writing in Part 2 exhibited voices of operatic quality, especially Sherry Fischer, who would have stopped the show had Preu not pressed on. But, as is often the case with this ensemble under the direction of Julian Gomez-Giraldo, the most unforgettable were the moments of soft singing in Part 3, where the touching beauty of Bernstein's melody met its perfect vehicle in the Chorale's exquisitely beautiful, warm tone.

Get more news and information at Spokesman.com