

CONCERT REVIEW

Oregon Mozart Players master church venue

The Baroque program proves a perfect fit for the mood of the holiday season

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The Oregon Mozart Players' performance Sunday night was anything but the typical concert experience.

The "Baroque for the Holidays" concert was held under the beautiful dome of the First Christian Church in downtown Eugene. Candles illuminated the aisles and stage.

The intimate setting fit the spirit of the holidays, and was a festive choice outside the Mozart Players' usual home at the Hult Center for the Performing Arts.

The concert was well attended. Sweaters and scarves filled nearly all the pews.

The program included three orchestral suites: Ottorino Respighi's "Ancient Airs and Dances," Suite No. 3; George Frederic Handel's Suite No. 1 in F Major from "Water Music;" and Johann Sebastian Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 1 in C Major.

Respighi's "Ancient Airs and Dances" is a collection of three lute transcriptions from the 17th and 18th century. It was orchestrated for string orchestra (seven violins, two violas, two cellos and bass).

The sets date from 1917, 1923 and 1931. Although the work was composed in the 20th century, Respighi's transcription demonstrates his competency and ingenuity as a composer.

The first movement, a slow dance in triple meter by an anonymous composer, begins with a lyrical melody in the violins over pizzicato low strings. The Mozart Players' control of dynamics was impressive.

The balance among instruments also was noteworthy; each voice could be heard with clarity. Not until halfway through the second movement did the music demand the ensemble to play at full volume.

Of particular merit was how quickly the ensemble adjusted to the performance

space, which amplified the music's rich counterpoint.

The final movement, a passacaglia by Lodovico Roncalli, was the most romanticized of the Baroque dance movements.

The passacaglia was typical; it was in a slow triple meter and consisted of a series of variations over a repeated bass figure. The piece begins with a sweeping motif in the minor key played by the violins. The cellos take the theme and pass it along to the entire ensemble.

The lush chords and heavy bowing gave this movement a certain exotic charm. Perhaps the concert would have been more daring had this work been placed last on the program, given its grand nature.

Handel's Suite No. 1 required all the performers to be present, including (in addition to the strings from the Respighi) two horns, two oboes, bassoon and harpsichord.

Horn players David Kruse and Lydia Van Dreel routinely projected festive licks in harmony. Oboe players Cheryl Denice and Kris Klavik were kept busy with the constant sixteenth notes of their parts. Such repetition does not suggest Handel's suite was monotonous.

At one point, there was a delicate trio between Denice, Klavik and bassoonist Helena Kopchick. Overall, the suite exuded a festive vibe.

Following intermission was Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 1. The violins begin the opening section with a stately melody flavored with ornamentation. Also present are syncopated rhythms and rich unison chords in the ensemble.

The contrasting section, in a quicker feel, features frequent soloistic interjections. What follows is a return to the opening section, this time nearly half as long.

In comparison to Handel's suite, Bach's is lighter in texture. Certainly, the environment for which each work was written would have influenced this. Handel's "Water Music" was composed for a royal water pageant down the Thames, whereas Bach's music was for an indoor setting.

Overall, the solo-ensemble dynamic was well-balanced. The ensemble's music director, Glen Cortese, kept the players on the front side of the beat, giving the music a forward, yet unrushed drive.

Although no one was dancing I did notice several people nodding their heads. It would be safe to say that several were contemplating this rhetorical music while dazing into a candle flame.

The Oregon Mozart Players gave a charming performance demonstrating precision, sensitivity and enthusiasm for the music.

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