

CONCERT REVIEW

Sunny sounds warm up one chilly evening

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The temperature outside hovered around freezing Saturday evening, but inside the Hult Center, where the Oregon Mozart Players presented a program dubbed "Viva Italia!," the playing was anything but chilly.

Both the orchestra's board president and its conductor, in prefatory remarks, promised listeners a musical journey to "Sunny Italy." After hearing the "saltarello" that closes Felix Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony, even the skeptic scribe could almost smell the Mediterranean air.

Mendelssohn began his Fourth Symphony during a trip to Italy in 1830-32, completing the work in 1833. The symphony is full of rhythmic vitality and wonderful melodies, and is brilliantly orchestrated. Conductor Glen Cortese led the ensemble in a memorable reading that was clean and accurate but didn't lose any of the blithesome energy so characteristic of the work.

In the opening allegro vivace, set into motion by the repeated notes in the woodwind accompaniment and the dancelike melody in the strings, the orchestra maintained an uninterrupted sense of motion, without sacrificing lyricism. I'm used to hearing this work with a bigger string section, but whatever was lost in sonic heft was compensated for in clarity.

The andante con moto, which may have been inspired by a religious procession Mendelssohn saw during his Italian travels, opens with a steady pizzicato bass line that recalls the kind of contrapuntal writing heard in many Baroque works, in particular J.S. Bach's "St. John" Passion. Over this walking bass, a melody of haunting beauty emerges, to which the ensemble brought great intensity and unflagging drive.

The graceful minuet that follows is a welcome relief from the tension of the preceding movements, and the chamber orchestra delivered it with appropriate

simplicity and refinement.

The quick-tempo saltarello - a lively, hopping dance of Italian origin - completes the symphony. The players came through superbly, the performance sizzled throughout.

Ottorino Respighi is known for his trilogy of tone poems based on Roman subjects, but some of his lesser-known works are no less masterful. During the program's first half, the orchestra offered the composer's "Trittico Botticelliano," a program suite based on three paintings by Sandro Botticelli found in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. The orchestral writing is no less ingenious and colorful than that found in the "Pines of Rome," but there is less flashiness and more musical substance than the more famous work.

The ensemble gave an especially transparent account of the opening, "Spring." The horn and trumpet calls emerging over the pellucid, shimmering carpet of sound produced by the strings, and high woodwinds evoked verdancy and light. This piece was followed by "The Adoration of the Magi," in which the various wind players, including oboist Cheryl Denice, wove elegantly shaped melodic lines. The movement uses the tune of the familiar Latin carol, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," and its scoring, with dark timbres and its open harmonies, casts a kind of medieval quality to the music.

As in the opening movement, the final picture, "The Birth of Venus," translates into sound the bright hues and sensuality of the Botticelli paintings. Again, clarity and subtlety characterized the orchestra's playing.

The Respighi work was followed by Antonio Salieri's Sinfonia in D ("Veneziana"), which is actually a composite work drawn from overtures to two of the composer's operas. In his opening remarks, the conductor said that if one were to hear a work such as this on the radio, listeners probably would peg it as a W.A. Mozart work.

I don't think so. The Sinfonia is certainly competent, logically structured, with sturdy melodies, but it has little of the harmonic sophistication or developmental genius one finds, for example, in the music of Mozart or F.J. Haydn.

Nevertheless, praise is due to the band for its well-regulated reading, characterized by stately lyricism in the middle andantino and propulsive spiritedness in the outer movements.

The concert opened with Gioacchino Rossini's lighthearted, sometimes clamorous Overture to "L'Italiana in Algeri," presented Saturday with style and enthusiasm. The orchestra repeated the program Sunday afternoon in Beall Hall.

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