

CONCERT REVIEW

Master bassoonist delves deep into Mozart

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The popular conception that the bassoon, along with the oboe, is one of the most difficult of all musical instruments to play appeared to have been given the lie on Sunday afternoon in the University of Oregon Music School's Beall Hall.

The Oregon Mozart Players' second concert of the 2006-07 season featured world renowned bassoonist Frank Morelli as soloist. And we, the audience, were fortunate indeed to see and hear this master musician perform, apparently effortlessly, on his chosen instrument. Glen Cortese, the Oregon Mozart Players' artistic director, gave the concert the sobriquet "The Magic Bassoon," a takeoff from W.A. Mozart's famous opera, "The Magic Flute." And magic there was in abundance, both before and after intermission.

The program commenced with Richard Strauss's Duet and Concertino for Clarinet, Bassoon, Strings and Harp. Composed in 1947 when he was 83, just two years before his death, it is in three movements, which are played without pauses between them.

The concertina is infused with a sense of nostalgia and, at times, sadness. It is clearly the work of a mature composer, perhaps looking back over his long life.

The gentle orchestral opening introduced Carol Robe's strong clarinet rendition of the first, languid melody. That solo lasted, it seemed, for two minutes.

Then the magic commenced.

Morelli coaxed the most exquisite tones from his instrument. They were at times husky, gruff and growling, and at others sweet and soaring across three octaves, but always mellow and elegant, like a fine, mature red Burgundy.

The two soloists worked together harmoniously, exchanging the often-complex, fugal lines from clarinet to bassoon and back again. The orchestra, just strings and harp, provided superbly coordinated

backing, but we had to wait until after intermission to hear what it was really capable of.

As an added treat, it was wonderful to have the two solo instruments in front of the orchestra, and in full view. Normally, of course, all the woodwinds are buried behind the second violins and violas, and one can only glimpse the tops of the bassoons waving over the heads of the musicians and their music stands.

The second piece in the program was Mozart's quite famous Bassoon Concerto in B-flat Major, K. 191, written when the composer was barely 18.

Belying the youthfulness of its author, the work features some quite daring progressions. It also gives the soloist ample opportunity to show off his virtuosity, as well as the range and colorful tones the instrument is capable of.

Morelli treated us to all of these attributes throughout the three-movement concerto, although the second movement (andante) was particularly effective for its serenity. I was reminded of a soft, gentle wind making delicate ripples on a quiet pond.

The cadenza in this movement, too, was marvelously expressive, as the notes wafted quietly out of the instrument. The jolly, jaunty third movement gave soloist and orchestra plenty of opportunities to display their skills and precision.

After intermission, the orchestra no longer had to compete for attention with soloists, having the stage to itself as it performed Franz Schubert's Symphony No. 5 in B-flat Major. This, too, is the work of a young man, Schubert being only nineteen when it was composed. It is evidently a favorite of the Mozart Players as they performed it in January 2000 under conductor Andrew Massey, and I believe, one other time since then.

Looking back at my comments on the 2000 performance which, although a very good one, I was struck by how this band has developed and matured in the intervening six years.

Much credit for this must, of course, go to Maestro Glen Cortese. In my opinion he has developed a very good chamber orchestra into a truly great one that can stand shoulder to shoulder with any like-sized group in this country. The players are now so well coordinated not

only in their own sections, but also with the other sections that they play seamlessly as one unit, not as thirty or so individuals. They exhibit a sure-footed confidence in their playing, which is the hallmark of a very good professional band. The word "confidence" keeps popping up in my notes on the Sunday performance.

It would be unfair to single out any individual musicians for special mention because everyone performed flawlessly. There was lovely work from the flute, oboes and bassoon and a beautifully restrained French horn; the cellos were silky, and the shimmering violins and violas were at their superb best. All responded with alacrity to Cortese's commands. And, of course, Beall Hall's superb acoustics put the finishing touch on a memorable afternoon of brilliant music making. What else is there to say?

John Farnworth of Vida reviews classical music for The Register-Guard.