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Mozart Players master modernity, by Crumb

Conductor Glen Cortese and company do themselves proud with “Vestiges”

BY TOM MANOFF

For The Register-Guard

Although I’ve only met him a couple of times, David Crumb strikes me as a quiet and unassuming soul, untouched by any need to hype his music—this in a time when many classical composers are unsure of their music’s place in the world. Crumb is refreshing on this account. He’s not dripping with ego, and neither is his music.

“Vestiges of a Distant Time,” a work performed Saturday evening by the Oregon Mozart Players at the Hult Center’s Soreng Theatre, proves the point. While the idea for the work is intensely personal, Crumb has realized it without a heavy hand.

The music arises from a feeling that Crumb has when “traveling to regions where ancient civilizations once stood.” Jerusalem’s old city and Mayan ruins in Central America are places where Crumb has felt surrounded by the “ghosts of antiquity.”

Here’s an idea that easily could have gone awry in some literal portrayal of ancient spirits and crumbling ruins. But Crumb’s vision is filtered through an essentially ethereal aesthetic, based in very solid musical thinking. The result, even without its “story,” is both lyrical and inventive.

The composer is an especially gifted orchestrator. I had the score for a week before the concert, and considering its difficulty, wondered if the Mozart Players could pull it off.

Conductor Glen Cortese has a reputation at Manhattan School of Music (the conservatory where he formerly led the conducting program) as a “go-to guy” for contemporary music. Turns out that this “rep” is right.

The performance of Crumb’s work was a surprise on several levels. Details that went right far outweighed those that didn’t. And most important, Cortese shaped the structure in way that absolutely convinced the ear of the composer’s intention.

A first-rate outing for composer, conductor and orchestra.

Eugene is no picnic spot for living composers. They have few opportunities for performances. And, unlike more vital musical environments, performers seem uninterested or even unable to sustain a dialogue with composers at the cultural and structural level of music.

Audiences, also, are woefully unlearned in contemporary idioms. Well, there’s always another Beethoven symphony or sonata to play.

Cortese’s willingness to program contemporary music, and his expertise with its idioms, makes him Eugene’s best hope at present for contemporary music. It’s one thing to program it, but another thing to understand it.

Nathaniel Rosen was the soloist in F.J. Haydn’s Cello Concerto in C Major.

Having heard Rosen perform in the late 1970s, I'm a fan. I also like his recording of J.S. Bach's Suites for Solo Cello. The great strength of his playing is the phrasing: long lines moving toward a goal with an emotional involvement that doesn't go overboard.

It wasn't his best night in the intonation department. Nonetheless, there were some fine moments, especially in the second movement.

On an evening when the orchestra played very well, it saved the best for last.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante in E-flat Major (K.297b), featured four wonderful soloists from the orchestra: Jill Pauls, flute; Cheryl Denice, oboe; Helena Kopchick, bassoon; and David Kruse, horn.

The playing was delightful. Relaxed and confident, these musicians showed off the high level of wind playing in this ensemble. The orchestra supported the soloists with a full-bodied and artfully phrased sound.

Mozart would be proud. Well, maybe.

The work is a reconstruction by Robert Levin from solo parts discovered some years ago. In fact, there's some argument whether Mozart is the real composer. Levin is the recognized master at being Mozart when the music at hand is in some way unfinished.

The first two movements sounded Mozartean enough for me. The third, a really klunky set of variations, seemed at times like a student's theory homework.

Since there is no definitive version of the work, why not cut a few of those variations next time?

Tom Manoff is the classical music critic for National Public Radio's "All Things Considered."