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Mozart Players offer satisfying ‘French Roast’

BY TERRY MCQUILKIN
For The Register-Guard

In an all-orchestral concert billed as “French Roast,” the Oregon Mozart Players offered listeners a colorful Francophile program Saturday evening at the Hult Center, showcasing many of the orchestra’s individual players, as well as the ensemble itself.

Endeavoring to keep the mood light, conductor Glen Cortese opened with good-natured (if slightly irreverent) jabs at France and its people. His “roasting” of the French continued between pieces throughout the evening, and each time he followed his humorous remarks with cogent observations about the music.

The musical proceedings began with Fauré’s well-loved “Pavane.” I would have liked more dynamic contrast in this work (as well as the one that followed), but Cortese’s understated approach had a good deal of courtly charm.

The ensemble followed this with Claude Debussy’s “Danse,” as colorfully orchestrated by Maurice Ravel. Originally a piano piece titled “Tarentelle Styrienne,” the work is rhythmically challenging, but especially so in its orchestral incarnation. Cortese led a clean and vibrant account of the work, and a tip of the beret goes to hornist Lydia Van Dreel, whose seemingly effortless delivery of the main melody was a delight to hear.

The two short French works that opened the program were followed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s Symphony No. 31 in D Major. Known as the “Paris” Symphony (there’s the French connection), it has the specifications favored by the Parisian audience for whom it was written, including an opening unison flourish, concise development sections and a three-movement design.

The orchestra played with clarity and precision, and brought a good deal of élan to the outer movements. One would have liked a little more lyrical shaping in the Andante, but the playing was stylish nonetheless. Cortese evoked from his players a good deal of excitement in the driving finale, a movement peppered with inventive fugal writing.

Following intermission, the Mozart Players delivered the most substantial installment of the evening—Ravel’s charming and skillfully orchestrated “Mother Goose.” Originally conceived as a set of five pieces for piano duet, Ravel turned the music into a ballet, expanding the original dimensions by adding an introduction, a dance and some connecting material.

A few bars of out-of-tune playing at the beginning proved to be no more than a momentary problem, and the high level of musicianship of the ensemble’s members, as well as the group’s cohesiveness, was very much in evidence. Typically the work is played by a full-sized orchestra rather than a 37-piece chamber group, and balances occasionally differed from what I’m used to. But that didn’t detract from the brilliance of Ravel’s lush harmonies and dazzling orchestration.

Though colorful, much of Ravel’s scoring is light, and the music offers countless opportunities to hear various woodwind solos, including the wonderfully executed high-pitched chirpings of Sophia Tegart’s piccolo in “Tom Thumb” and the low grumbings of Charlene Decker’s contrabassoon in “Conversations of Sleeping Beauty and the Beast.”

Ravel chose the clarinet to depict Sleeping Beauty, and acting principal Blake McGee offered an exquisite and highly expressive account of these lines. There are clarinet solos throughout the ballet, and these McGee played with richness, vibrancy and lyricism at every turn.

Speaking of lyricism, oboist Cheryl Denise and English horn player Kris Klavik brought poignancy and melancholy to the “Tom Thumb” movement.

Ravel was fascinated by the “exotic” sounds of the Far East, and in “Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas,” he evoked those sounds by using high woodwinds, pizzicato strings and various metal instruments, and by using pentatonic scales. This movement showcased the florid technique of oboist Denise, as well as that of flutist Jill Pauls and piccolo player Tegart.

Three string principals—violinist Alice Blankenship, violist Abigail Stoughton and cellist Ann Grabe—had short solos in the last section, “The Enchanted Garden,” and all delivered their lines with sweetness and clarity.

Throughout the 30-minute work, Cortese maintained a fine sense of motion and presided over well-controlled ensemble playing, and the stirring crescendo that concluded “The Enchanted Garden” was a perfect case in point.

Terry McQuilkin, an adjunct instructor of composition at the University of Oregon, reviews classical music for The Register-Guard.