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Tuesday, Feb 03, 2004

Music

Posted on Tue, Feb. 03, 2004

O'Connor's fiddle colors 'Seasons'

By Georgia Rowe
TIMES CORRESPONDENT

At first glance, there didn't seem to be any thematic thread connecting the two works on this week's California Symphony program, which had its first performance Sunday evening at the Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts.

Yet the similarities between Mark O'Connor's fiddle concerto, "The American Seasons," and Felix Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 4 in A major, Op. 90, "Italian," became readily apparent in performance.

Although they were composed more than 150 years apart, both draw freely on folk music and country idioms -- particularly the dance music of the countries named in their respective titles. And, under the direction of Barry Jekowsky, each emerged in a vibrant reading, adding up to a two-hour concert that was more stimulating than it looked on paper. The program has its final repeat at 8 tonight.

There are differences, of course -- Mendelssohn acquired the raw materials for his symphony on a single trip to Italy when he was just 21. Fiddler/composer O'Connor, who was born and raised in Seattle, has had a lifetime to assimilate the folk, jazz and bluegrass elements that are the basis of his concerto.

Still, it was striking to hear the works performed back to back and to get a sense of how each composer was influenced by music that lives outside the classical mainstream.

O'Connor was the soloist for his own concerto, which came across in an attractive, well-shaped performance. Subtitled "Seasons of an American Life," the work is modeled after Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," with movements inscribed "Spring," "Summer," "Fall" and "Winter." Like its Baroque predecessor, the score demands virtuosity from its soloist. But the music is distinctly American.

The fiddle is the first voice heard in the lively first movement, "Spring," and it continues to be the predominant instrument throughout the 40-minute work. The score is firmly rooted in the American folk tradition; the writing for orchestra (augmented Sunday by guitarist Mark Teicholz) is rich and expansive in the manner of Copland.

The second movement starts in a more reflective mood, with the fiddle bending notes in an ambling melody echoed by the low strings. Jekowsky gave soloist and orchestra plenty of breathing room, and the music sounded aptly spacious.

"Fall" finds O'Connor at his most lyrical. The movement begins with a wistful theme, played tenderly by the soloist; it is both nostalgic and slightly off-center, like an old photo viewed through a distorted lens. The finale brings more kinetic playing, with Irish jigs and American reels contributing to its exuberant mood.

With his sweet tone and light, agile phrasing, O'Connor is the ideal soloist for the work. Jekowsky gave him strong support, both in the concerto and during the encore, which included excerpts from O'Connor's "Strings and Threads," a suite of jazz swing tunes for fiddle and orchestra.

After intermission, Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony afforded Jekowsky and the ensemble further opportunity to shine. What impressed most about this performance was its dynamic framework, from the fleet traversal of the sunny first movement to the fierce energy of the finale's dance music, based on the Italian saltarello that

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Mendelssohn first heard in Rome.

Jekowsky bolstered the performance with a fascinating bit of commentary on Mendelssohn's revisions to the symphony (the composer hated the original version, despite its instant acclaim, and continued to tinker with it for several years). To illustrate his points, he directed the orchestra to play the finale twice -- once in its original form, the second time in its final revision. It was the aural equivalent of instant replay, and it ended the evening on an illuminating note.

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CONCERT REVIEW

- **WHAT:** California Symphony, with violinist Mark O'Connor, performing O'Connor's "American Seasons" and Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 4
- **WHEN:** 8 tonight
- **WHERE:** Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts, Civic Drive at Locust Street, Walnut Creek
- **HOW MUCH:** \$39-\$59 general, \$20 students
- **CONTACT:** 925-943-SHOW, www.dlra.org



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