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Posted on Tue, Mar. 16, 2004

Symphony offers solid 'L'Histoire'

By Georgia Rowe
TIMES CORRESPONDENT

DESPITE THE enduring popularity of large-scale Stravinsky works such as "The Firebird" and "The Rite of Spring," the composer's "L'Histoire du Soldat" (The Soldier's Tale) is seldom heard in concert halls. The ever-enterprising California Symphony gave it a vibrant performance Sunday evening at the Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts; Stravinsky fans who have never experienced this odd little fable combining music and spoken word have another chance to catch it when it repeats tonight at 8.

It wasn't just the repertoire, which also included William Walton's "Faade" and Barber's "Adagio for Strings," that made Sunday's concert unusual.

In what was the second chamber program in as many years assembled by music director Barry Jekowsky, the full orchestra was reduced to a small ensemble drawn from the cream of the 17-year-old California Symphony's ranks. There were never more than seven musicians onstage at any given time, but they were joined by a roster of guests that included actors from the Center Repertory Company, a dancer from the Diablo Ballet and TV news anchor Dan Ashley.

They all came together splendidly in the second half's performance of "L'Histoire du Soldat." With its juxtaposition of music, storytelling and dance, Stravinsky's 1918 take on the Faust legend places particular demands on the performers, and under Jekowsky's cogent direction, each person onstage made essential contributions.

Written in collaboration with the Swiss author D.F. Ramuz, the story is based on a Russian fable about a fiddle-playing soldier who has a run-in with a wily, smooth-talking Devil. The score also calls for a Princess (a nonspeaking role) and a Narrator.

The music, which is presented in a series of brief tableaux, is pure Stravinsky -- bright, brash and wonderfully jazzy, with smart little parodies of dance styles (ragtime, waltz and tango) bumping up against marches and chorales.

A chamber group of seven musicians dug into the score with obvious relish. There were luminous star turns, especially from violinist Kay Stern (moonlighting from her regular job as concertmaster of the San Francisco Ballet orchestra), as well as clarinetist Frank Renk, bassoonist Gregory Barber, trumpeter James Dooley and trombonist Donald Benham.

Actor Jeffrey Draper was a forthright and charismatic presence as the Soldier, and Keith Burkland was an elegant Devil. Ashley's narration was clear and well-timed. Tina Kay Bohnstedt's lithe Princess, choreographed by Viktor Kabaniaev, exuded charm.

"Faade" was composed just three years after "L'Histoire du Soldat," and it also incorporates spoken text. The similarities end there. The original cycle comprises more than 50 settings of poems by Edith Sitwell, and Walton reshuffled them numerous times before putting half of them into a suite. With their zippy tempo changes and blithe nonsense rhymes, the settings are beloved of music majors, voice students and imitators (Noel Coward wrote a parody of the cycle titled "The Swiss Family Whittlebot").

Yet they're not very engaging for an audience. Jekowsky led six musicians (Renk, cellist Leighton Fong, flutist Michelle Caimotto, alto saxophonist David Henderson, trumpeter John King and percussionist Mark Veregge) through 22 of the settings, and although the spoken parts were delivered with precision by Center Rep's Barbara Reynolds and Tim Reynolds, the 40-minute performance quickly grew tedious.

Barber's "Adagio for Strings," which opened the program, came across in a performance marked by eloquence and conviction. The players were Stern, her fellow violinist Josepha Fath, violist Janet Lynch-Gillespie, cellist Fong and bassist Barry Green.

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- WHO: The California Symphony
- WHAT: Music by Stravinsky, William Walton and Samuel Barber
- WHERE: Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts, Civic Drive at Locust Street, Walnut Creek
- WHEN: 8 tonight
- HOW MUCH: \$20-\$59
- CONTACT: 925-943-SHOW



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