



BROADCASTING & MEDIA PRODUCTION St. Louis, Missouri

Currently in only its fourth season, The Metropolitan Orchestra of St. Louis has already emerged as one of the most significant new voices in the St. Louis arts scene. Since its founding by Allen Carl Larson, now designated Conductor Laureate, the orchestra has demonstrated solid professional growth, characterized by a bold yet lyrical and smooth tone, with careful phrasing and impeccable intonation.

The programming selections featured by the orchestra are generally conservative, but that is a wise choice for several reasons. It has been said that our orchestras are becoming museums, but, in the absence of substantive music education in far too many of our public and independent schools, it is necessary to first educate the public to understand and appreciate the language of our musical heritage. The St. Louis symphony has opted differently, offering a wide range of contemporary music in addition to the classics. As a leader of the musical community, it is necessary that they do so, but the result has been a drastic slump in ticket sales. By showcasing the vast historical symphonic repertoire, The Metropolitan Orchestra is creating future audiences and delighting them in the process.

Sunday's program, held at the orchestra's home auditorium at First Presbyterian Church in Kirkwood, was culled from the German/Austrian tradition, yet it offered surprising diversity. The concert opened with Carl Maria von Weber's overture to "Der Freischütz" (The Freeshooter). Although Weber's opera is iconic in Germany, its music is not performed here nearly as often as one might think. Although he holds a position of respect in music history, Weber is probably an underserved composer of great merit. The horn section of the orchestra shone with exceptional clarity in this work and, indeed, throughout the entire evening, but every section in the orchestra projected a similar strength.

Although the stage area at First Presbyterian is a bit cramped for a full symphony orchestra, making it difficult to achieve careful balance, the overall sound was well sculpted. At times, it might have been helpful to tone down the brass and percussion just a bit, so that the sheen of the strings and agility of the woodwinds could ring out more clearly, but nothing was lost. The stone construction of the auditorium was not nearly as unkind as one might think.

Conductor Laureate Larson directed the Weber overture and the ensuing "Emperor Waltz" of Johann Strauss II, a perennial audience favorite. Larson, with a long history at the helm of the Webster Symphony, brought his depth of experience to bear. He has developed a consistent, singing tone throughout the ensemble that remained unwavering throughout the evening.

Following the intermission, Music Director Wendy Lea led the orchestra in Johannes Brahms' Symphony No.2. Brahms wrote only 4 symphonies, and each one is monumental, the outgrowth of a symphonic tradition that began with Beethoven. The symphonies of Brahms require intelligent thought to perform, as well as physical skill. The orchestra was certainly equal to the task. At times I would have preferred brisker tempos, but the drama and contrast written in by Brahms remained present in this performance.

If I may be forgiven, I have to inject a personal note at this point. Some years ago I was teaching a music appreciation course on the high school level. I was provided with a slick, shiny new textbook written by a graduate of the Oberlin Conservatory who clearly was an accomplished and learned musician. The textbook was replete with profiles of student musicians as well as professionals, lots of photographs, and leaned heavily on "world music", i.e. music of diverse cultures. I was provided an in-complete set of CD's which almost rendered the textbook ineffective. But the saddest blow of all was the fact that this expensive book never mentioned Johannes Brahms - one of the proverbial "Three B's" of music - even once. At the talk given to us by the author to introduce the book, he shrugged off this concern by saying it was up to the teacher to supplement the text. Fair enough, but what about those students whose teachers fail to do so? This is why I feel the mission of an ensemble such as The Metropolitan Orchestra is critical to providing true and lasting education to members of our community. Education doesn't always come only in classrooms; it takes place in concert halls as well, and sometimes even more effectively.

Gary Scott