

Indian Hill Orchestra Illuminates Bartók Concerto for Saturday Audience

Saturday night occasioned a grand experiment, a sort of “teaching moment,” by the Orchestra of Indian Hill under music director Bruce Hangen, reminiscent of past television broadcasts by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic and, more recently, by Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony.

The first half of the program at Littleton High School’s Performing Arts Center consisted of a guided tour of Béla Bartók’s five-movement Concerto for Orchestra, arguably the most brilliantly inventive orchestral composition of the 20th century, while the second half brought an uninterrupted rendition of the entire work.

Bartók’s Concerto is by no means an unfamiliar piece for many concert-goers, as it gained immediate popularity after its composition and first performance by the Boston Symphony in 1944. However, its broad use of nontraditional harmonies, musical lines constructed with fourths instead of triads, themes based on Hungarian folk idioms, and its metric diversity may present a new experience for listeners raised on 18th- and 19th-century styles.

Conductor Hangen therefore considered an effort worthwhile to point out many of the elements, ably illustrated by his musicians, that draw Bartók’s work together and make it truly exciting for audience members who might otherwise become lost in the extensive palette of instrumental colors, textures and thematic transformations that Bartók employed. The time spent paid off handsomely; Bernstein, Thomas and even Bartók himself would have applauded.

Besides its intrinsic and dynamic musical expression, what makes Bartók’s Concerto so interesting and rewarding is that it is truly a concerto for the entire orchestra, in which every section – strings, brass, woodwinds and percussion – has its moment or moments in the sun as soloist or in small ensembles. The resulting sound is keenly transparent, brilliantly orchestrated to exploit the techniques and timbres of each instrument, all in the context of well-tested musical forms, constantly changing meters and superbly crafted polyphony.

The Concerto for Orchestra presents a formidable challenge for any orchestra, putting every player on his or her mettle in stark relief where each note can be clearly heard and appreciated. The Orchestra of Indian Hill did not shrink from its demands, delivering the wide dynamic range Bartók wanted in the mysterious opening of the first movement, the tweaking nature of the second movement’s instrumental couplings, the third movement’s lyricism, the contrasting sections of the fourth and the furious energy of the finale. The solo and ensemble work of the brass and woodwinds was magnificent and riveting.

Is this plan of lecture-demonstration-plus-performance a model for future concerts? Perhaps, but only infrequently. Most audiences, amply equipped with program notes,

come to hear the works themselves – less talk, more music. However, there are compositions, such as Bartók’s Concerto, with less-familiar idioms and a richness of invention that escape good understanding without a closer look, much less being fully appreciated in a single hearing. Judging by the number of Saturday’s curtain calls and after-concert comments, conductor Hangen’s elucidations and the orchestra’s musical skills did Bartók’s work proud.

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