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Mozart Players' conductor search opens on strong note

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Does Eugene have its newest maestro?

Based on Oregon Mozart Players' candidate David Hattner's performance on Saturday evening in the Soreng Theater, we are off to a fine start in the search for the new conductor. Not only does he appear to be a fine conductor, but he is also extremely articulate and has a warm, sunny, likeable disposition, which, it was quite obvious, endeared him to the sold-out house.

The program commenced with Three Latin-American Sketches by Aaron Copland. Hattner's conducting style was strongly evident from the very first bar. He is very animated, with lashes of body movement to drive the momentum of the music and the musicians playing it. But it seemed natural, unforced and not extreme. The music itself is very rhythmic, syncopated, bouncy and jocular, all these apparent in Hattner's conducting style, and thus passed on to the players.

There was some interesting counterpoint, with fine solo contributions by Dave Keches-Chartney on trumpet; Sean Wagoner, percussion; Jill Pauls, flute; Annalina Morton, oboe; Carol Robe, clarinet; and Helena Kopchick Spencer, bassoon.

The focus and highlight of the concert was W.A. Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 in C major, K. 467. The soloist was the University of Oregon School of Music's very proficient Dean Kramer. His playing was strong without being forceful, note-perfect and sprinkled with some attention-gaining legatos. Particularly arresting were his own cadenzas in the first and third movements, so much more improvisational than the standard ones we usually hear.

Like Andre Watts' performance of the Rachmaninov concerto with the Eugene Symphony a couple of weeks ago, Kramer kept a sharp eye on Hattner, allowing the conductor, not the soloist, to set the pacing of the piece. The festiveness of the first movement, the astoundingly beautiful and poignant second, and the energetic, crackling brilliance of the third were all admirably executed by soloist, conductor and orchestra in unison.

The concert concluded with Luigi Cherubini's Symphony in D major. This four-movement work, certainly not in league with those of the great composers, nevertheless has some charm and beauty. As conductor Hattner pointed out in his introductory and amusing remarks before the performance, we should expect to hear echoes of Schubert and Rossini, which we did. I also detected some Haydnesque touches here and there.

There were some interesting moments of counterpoint in the first movement; some languid, lovely melodies in the second, with an exquisite interlude played by the flute, two oboes and two bassoons; a scherzo-minuet third movement featuring some precision playing in the winds, creating an almost “clucking sound” — very amusing; and a dazzling fourth movement containing some complex instrumental playing.

Hattner was especially animated in this last movement, displaying an energy one rarely sees on the podium. Most importantly, he was in complete control of the music and musicians, who responded with alacrity and enthusiasm to his leadership.

We shall be fortunate indeed if Hattner becomes the Mozart Players’ conductor of choice. But the next two concerts conducted by Kelly Kuo and Michael Nowak will be exciting to watch.

John Farnworth of Vida reviews classical music for The Register-Guard.

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