

Latin America's musical diversity shows in concert

BY TERRY MCQUILKIN
For The Register-Guard

Posted to Web: Tuesday, Jan 12, 2010 10:22AM
Appeared in print: Monday, Jan 11, 2010, page D4

During the past four years, Glen Cortese, artistic director of the Oregon Mozart Players, has offered an annual musical travelogue, building programs focusing on the music of Spain, France, Italy and England. Saturday evening's program at the Hult Center broke with the familiar Eurocentric tradition and presented works by Latin American composers.

In an effort to depart from the stereotypes we often hold about Latin American music, Cortese designed his program to illustrate the diversity of styles within the region's classical music. Opening with the Allegro from Mexican composer Carlos Chávez's Symphony No. 5, the strings of the orchestra sounded exceptionally tight and surprisingly full.

Although Chávez, as composer, conductor, writer and educator, was of central importance in the development of Mexico's music, his music is underappreciated in the United States. (Of his six stylistically diverse symphonies, only one enjoys semifrequent performances in this country.) It would have been interesting to hear all of the Fifth Symphony, but Cortese's decision to cut the second and third movements from the program was a wise one. The symphony is a well-crafted example of neoclassicism, but it is rather cerebral, and lacks the melodic interest and dramatic shape of his other symphonies. (Practical considerations may have played a role: The work's final movement is devilishly difficult.)

This allowed room for "Danzón No. 2," a fairly recent piece by Sonora-born Arturo Márquez. Based on the venerable popular Mexican dance form (itself evolved from the Cuban Danzón), it evokes the spirit of the old dance salons in Veracruz and Mexico City, and the orchestra effectively captured this spirit. Of the many effective soloists within the ensemble, special mention goes to clarinetist Blake McGee, who shaped his lines with elegance and flair.

Heitor Villa Lobos, Brazil's most important composer of the 20th century, wrote between 1930 and 1945 a series of nine "Bachianas Brasileiras," scored for various combinations of performers, and melding elements of Brazilian folk music with traits of Bach's music. The ensemble rounded out the first half of the evening with the last of these, scored for string orchestra. An occasional moment of ensemble imprecision or questionable intonation

detracted a bit, but the orchestra brought sensitivity to the opening Prelude and propulsive vigor to the syncopated Fugue.

The second portion opened with the premiere of Cortese's "Tango Fantasy," largely a reworking of three Argentine tangos, to which Cortese added original introductory and transitional material to produce a colorfully scored suite. Like the Márquez composition, "Tango Fantasy" gave many of the ensemble's soloists a moment to shine, including concertmaster Alice Blankenship, who delivered a dazzling cadenza. Two dancers (Robert Alexander Schwartz and Heidi Nelson), moving with panache and sensuality, came on stage during the last part of the eight-minute work.

The concert concluded with Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera's "Variaciones Concertantes," a work in which masterful counterpoint, melodic ingenuity and engaging rhythms combine to stirring dramatic effect. Following the hauntingly beautiful theme played by cellist Ann Grabe, the work's 11 variations spotlighted many of the orchestra's section leaders. All of the wind solos were handsomely delivered.

Terry McQuilkin, an adjunct instructor of composition at the University of Oregon, reviews classical music for The Register-Guard.

Copyright © 2010 — The Register-Guard, Eugene, Oregon, USA