

CONCERT REVIEW

Happy birthday, indeed, for Mozart Players

Chamber orchestra marks 25th year with performance worth celebrating

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It must have been the water. In 1982, Eugene was swept up in a bubble of creative energy that led to the founding of several major organizations which today are venerable institutions in our city. The Hult Center, the Eugene Weekly, and the Oregon Mozart Players have all feted themselves this fall to honor their 25 years in the community. Friday, it was the Mozart Players' turn to present a gala as a birthday present to itself and the community.

Led by Artistic Director and Conductor Glen Cortese, the chamber orchestra took on the larger venue of Silva Hall for a fascinating program that spanned almost two centuries and that challenged as well as displayed the sophistication and musicality of this group. Add the talents of two world-class guest artists, flutist Carol Wincenc and harpist Nancy Allen, and the result was an invigorating and celebratory evening.

The concert began with a fanfare: Handel's "Hornpipe" from his well-known collection of suites, "Water Music." The trumpets and horns blazed spot on and the strings were crisp in this bright piece that supposedly accompanied King George I down the Thames in his royal barge.

Another well-known, joyous piece followed, Mozart's "Concerto for Flute and Harp," with Wincenc and Allen taking the stage for the first time. As with most world-class soloists, these two made one hear the music again for the first time. Their technical abilities were a given, but it was in the lyrical passages, in the famous second movement, that the audience knew it was hearing something special. The lyricism and expressiveness of both instrumentalists imbued this section with warmth and expansiveness. Their three cadenzas were brilliant as was the playing of the orchestra. A rousing standing ovation greeted them at the conclusion.

Then began a series of less famous works which stretched the audience beyond the previous comfort-food music. Ralph Vaughan Williams' early choral work, "Toward the Unknown Region" brought on stage an ad hoc chorus, "The OMP Gala Chorus." Musically, this work is a fascinating amalgam of post-Wagnerian harmonies and the typical Church of England anthem, all set to one of those vague Walt Whitman poems in which the soul yearns for another world.

Unfortunately, this is the one piece of music in the concert that fell flat. Whether it was the mushy diction or odd miking of the chorus, or the monochromatic nature of the music—until the final blaze of glory—this work elicited only a tepid response from the audience.

After intermission the orchestra presented Cortese's composition, "Apollo's Fire," an eight-minute tone poem depicting the Greek god Apollo.

The music for the orchestra portrayed the other-worldly, ethereal world of the gods while the solo flute and harp characterized Apollo's frenetic energy. The work is tonal and its main motif simple and oft repeated; however, the musical interest lies in the diversity of haunting orchestral timbres and playful rhythmic variety.

The largest work of the evening, Robert Schumann's "Symphony No. 2 in C Major" was the ultimate test for this relatively small orchestra. While the symphony's seething, searching first three movements represent a darker music than was heard earlier and also represent this early Romantic composer's illness while writing these movements, the last movement overcomes these adversities with exuberance.

Cortese took a welcome crisp, clean approach to the first movement, more Mozartian than muddy Romanticism. Schumann's odd choice for a second movement, the scherzo, showed the influence of Felix Mendelssohn and was dazzling in the hands of the orchestra's strings. The melancholy adagio in C minor is really a song by one of Germany's great lieder composers and here the woodwinds sang beautifully. Like the Oregon Mozart Players on this particular night, the symphony reached its zenith in the finale as if to say, "We have triumphed."

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