

Chamber orchestra uses New York connections

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When Glen Cortese invites some of his musician friends from New York to perform with the Oregon Mozart Players, we are usually in for a treat.

This time, the conductor invited Amy Burton, soprano, and her pianist-composer husband, John Musto, to display their talents in a program called "Miraculous Miniatures."

On Saturday evening, in their second joint appearance with the Mozart Players, Burton and Musto helped to generate an elegant evening of music from three composers: W.A. Mozart, Ottorino Respighi and Musto himself.

Cortese named the concert "miniatures" not because the pieces themselves were short but because each composition required a small ensemble with, for instance, only a single instrument for each wind part. None of this diminished the size of the sound.

The concert began with a rich rendering of Respighi's "Trittico Botticelliano," a work which musically describes three familiar paintings by Sandro Botticelli: "La Primavera," "L'adorazione dei Magi" and "La Nascita di Venere."

For the paintings, Respighi composed three luxuriantly orchestrated instances of program music. The strings produced a lovely, shimmering sound depicting the birds of spring with dance rhythms representing the Three Graces.

The four woodwinds were outstanding in the music portraying the three Magi. Principal bassoonist Helena Kopchick, who gave a delightful introduction to Respighi's tripartite work, made good on her promise of some magical playing on the bassoon.

The undulating water sounds that bring Venus to life were captured with flair by the orchestra; the piano, celesta and harp added marvelous color.

The first part of the evening ended with Burton singing a song cycle composed by her husband. Musto is a formidable composer of song and opera; one writer compares him to Ned Rorem.

The cycle is entitled “Quiet Songs,” but they are far from quiet or about quietness. Instead, each poem portrays something lost or found.

They range from the delightful “maggie and milly and molly and may” by e.e. cummings to Edna St. Vincent Millay’s pessimistic Christmas poem. Musto set them to a lyrical vocal line, with dissonant accompaniments that undercut any incipient sentimentality.

Originally, Musto composed this music for voice and piano. But for the first time, he orchestrated the accompaniment for a small orchestral group.

The New York Times has described Burton as a “lustrous soprano.” Her voice is light yet creamy, with enough heft to carry through most orchestras. Her ability to color the vocal line and her superb diction make her an excellent interpreter of songs.

At moments, she soared to dramatic crescendos, as she did in the longest of the songs, “Quiet Song.” At other times, she entered effortlessly on a soft, high note as she did in “Lullaby.”

Her lower range, however, was at times inaudible, and at other times she had to fight the heavy orchestration. The Mozart Players were competent accompanists.

The group turned stellar in the last work, an early Mozart piano concerto with Musto as the piano soloist.

The dialogue between the orchestra and the soloist was exemplary. Musto’s facility at the piano and his interpretive skill were astounding.

Musto is theatrical in his compositions, and the same is true for his piano work. He moves from delicate trills and arpeggios to blistering crescendos. His rendering of the minor-keyed andantino drew out a romantic angst that Mozart might not have recognized.

Musto called the last movement allegro “fun,” and he ripped through this rondo. His cadenzas were marvelously inventive. The entire concerto was one of those rare, exquisite moments.

Long live the Oregon Mozart Players’ New York connection.

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