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Mozart Players play sweet and savory treats

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BY CAROLYN BERGQUIST

For The Register-Guard

“English Trifle” may not have been the best title for the Oregon Mozart Players’ program Sunday at Beall Hall. It seemed more satisfying than a sweet confection.

A closer analogy might have been a high tea’s range of savory and sweet morsels.

Taken as a whole, the program was a meditation on orchestral sound and texture. Yet somehow, it also was a walk through the English countryside to London’s concert halls.

Conductor Glen Cortese briefly introduced each piece before taking up the baton. He explained the rationale for their inclusion in the program and their context in the composers’ oeuvre, comments that welcomed us to the music as the musicians took their places.

Folk influences are prevalent in Gustav Holst’s charming and evocative “Brook Green Suite” (1933).

The liquid string sound of a melody harmonized in triads over a descending scale in the cellos and basses opens the Prelude, leading to the lush swim of sections one with another that settled to rest in a quiet pizzicato. The poignant, yet lilting Air is a beautifully measured melody tossed gently from one section to the next, while the Dance rouses all sections in cheerful exchanges of texture and lively rhythms.

The unity and precision of the string sections followed Cortese’s confident lead in this sprightly and delightful piece and set a tone for the rest of the concert.

Holst was a perfect aural framework for Ralph Vaughan-Williams’ “The Lark Ascending” (1914). The unity of the strings found in the Holst was subdued and mellowed to a quiet, full underpinning for the clear, sweet flight of soloist Alice Blankenship’s violin.

From the rich orchestral accompaniment, Carol Robe’s clarinet and David Kruse’s horn rose in phrases that arced under the flight of the trilling violin. The piece subsided into a gorgeous pianissimo that held the audience in near-breathless stillness as the last note faded to a lingering silence.

Having traveled from fullness to delicate intimacy, we met 8-year old W.A. Mozart in his Symphony No. 1 in E-flat Major (K.16).

I had my doubts that the symphony could follow such lovely lyricism. Surprisingly, its almost architectural clarity was a welcome contrast to the first two pieces.

Every change — whether of motif or addition of strings, horn or oboe — came clear to the fore. The piece exposed the structure, the bones of both the instrumentation and the form of the individual movements.

Cortese's tempos were crisp, and in the final movement the violins were wonderfully precise in the fast passages.

The formal reminder of the Mozart prepared the ear to hear the lyricism and more complex motivic interplay of Edward Elgar's "Serenade for Strings" (1892). It flowed into Joseph Haydn's Symphony No. 104 in D (1795), the "London" Symphony — the culmination of both this "English Trifle" and Haydn's symphonic output.

The opening Adagio was not ponderous, as it can be. Instead, it brought the ear through its delicately shifting minor harmonies and colors to the crisp tempo of the Allegro.

Cortese mentioned in his introduction that Haydn established the forces of the typical classical orchestra, with the pairs in the winds and horns. Also, the smaller string section of the Oregon Mozart Players more closely matches the forces of the day, allowing the texture come through more clearly.

Having the transparent Mozart still in our ears, the winds in Haydn's first movement were all the more delightful in their varied color palette. We could indeed hear the nuance more clearly than a larger string section would allow.

The contrasts in tempo and dynamic throughout the movements were vivid. The Menuetto became increasingly playful, with meter moving in two and three followed by pauses before a conclusion that left the audience hanging for a full two measures before resolving.

The Finale's main theme danced briskly, the playful character of the Menuetto coming throughout in variations on the main theme.

The Oregon Mozart Players are a wonderful community asset. The intimate size of the ensemble, its cohesion and the players' responsiveness to each other and to Cortese showed the beauties of these five treats for the ears.

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