

Albany Symphony Orchestra @ Troy Music Hall 12/18/09

By JOSEPH DALTON
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TROY – The match between Baroque music and the holiday season seems natural enough. But why are classical radio stations so addicted to it year round, especially during drive-time hours? Probably the combination of short forms, steady rhythms and generally cheerful demeanor.

Yet if the Albany Symphony Orchestra's Baroque concert, heard Friday night in Troy, was broadcast without explanation it might result in cars swerving out of lanes, perhaps even hitting ditches.

Music director David Alan Miller's premise was to slip in between masterworks by Bach and others some short newer pieces inspired by the Baroque. Three young composers were commissioned and though they're all still students at Juilliard, their music was fluent, assured and full of personality. Each work was a concerto featuring a soloist also from Juilliard. While none were as lulling as the genuine Baroque has become, they all provided a kind of listening test for what's new and what's old.

A rather elaborate comic story was behind Evan Fein's Concerto for Trumpet, "The Frustration of Gottfried Reiche." But the real humor came not from the vague narrative but instead from the increasingly warped and putrid harmonies of the second movement, which were barely hidden beneath the ever crisp Baroque textures. Soloist Colin Sieg was the sturdy straight man, rolling out quotes from the trumpet literature.

Gity Razaz's Concertino for Clarinet and Orchestra seldom resembled the Baroque at all, yet its lean, jazz-inspired sounds weren't entirely original either. It immediately brought to mind Stravinsky's "Ebony Concerto," which was written for Woody Herman. With a gorgeous full-bodied sound, Moran Katz was a terrific soloist.

"Vivaldi's Bicycle" by Michael Ippolito highlighted the commonalities between minimalism as well as rock music and the Baroque. In other words, you could always tap your foot. After some intonation difficulties in the first movement, cellist Dane Johansen gave a persuasive performance.

With only 21 players on stage, there were ample solo opportunities for members of the orchestra throughout the balance of the program. Each of the first chair string players had moments to shine in Correlli's Concerto Gross Opus 6 No. 8 "Christmas Concerto." And in the sections for full orchestra there came the cleanest, most lyric ensemble sound of the evening.

J.S. Bach's Suite No. 1 in C Major, the concert's finale, consisted of seven short movements with regular trios for the woodwinds played with busy assurance by oboists Karen Hosmer and Grace Johnson and bassoonist Stephen Walt. Greg Hayes was the evening's hardworking harpsichordist.

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union.

MUSIC REVIEW

Albany Symphony Orchestra and Great Artists of Tomorrow

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Where: Troy Savings Bank Music Hall

Duration: Two hours 10 minutes.