

Benjamin Zander conducts Albany Symphony Orchestra @ Palace Theater, 1/23/10

By JOSEPH DALTON
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ALBANY – If Benjamin Zander wasn't already friends with half of the Capital Region by the time he led the Albany Symphony Orchestra on Saturday night, it wasn't for lack of trying. The Boston conductor had a string of public appearances throughout the week, starting with a well attended talk on leadership Monday night at the Massry Center. It all culminated with Saturday's concert in the Palace Theatre featuring Mahler's Fifth Symphony.

A prescient depiction of modern angst, the Fifth dates from 1902 and is cast in five movements that stretch well more than an hour in length. Eight-three players were on stage for the performance.

To heighten the effect of Mahler's stormy vision, Zander began the program with a lilting picture of old Europe in the form of Johann Strauss' Emperor Waltzes. He used plenty of rubato, with most passages either racing along or almost dragging. Though the music was intimate, Zander's gestures were huge. Since he stands at least six feet tall, the crowd in the balcony could have probably followed along easily.

As if wiping away the exuberant life of his earlier symphonies, Mahler begins the Fifth with a desolate cry from the trumpet. Eric Berlin handled it and many more solos with aplomb

The first two movements are a near constant tug of war between romanticism and modernity. Imagine a joyous song accompanied by the march of soldiers. Yet Zander's interpretation seemed to accentuate the tender, such as the cello section's smooth composure during a descending melody in the second movement.

The central Scherzo was most arresting when the strings played pizzicato, followed by a number of solos from the woodwinds and brass. The passage culminated with one of Mahler's most obvious allusions to the waltz, which prompted a brief return of Zander's grand beat. He nearly touched the ceiling. Also memorable in the Scherzo was the sustained and full bodied playing of first horn William Hughes.

The string choir was all heart in the gentle Adagietto, with a delicate underpinning from harpist Lynette Wardle. When the music faded to nothing, the thrilling ride of the finale commenced immediately. The string of climaxes included a series of descending chords from the mighty brass.

Along the way there were moments to quibble about — an out of tune tympani in the opening movement, a sour tuba solo near the end of the second, and a vague and weary line from a horn near the end. But the larger perspective was Zander outlining a picture of the piece that a talented and dedicated orchestra filled in with both vivid color and deep sentiment.

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

MUSIC REVIEW

Albany Symphony Orchestra Benjamin Zander, guest conductor

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: Palace Theatre, Albany

Duration: One hour, 40 minutes with no intermission.

The crowd: About 2,000 with a number of new faces as well as devoted regulars