

Albany Symphony and the Parnas Sisters

Reviewed by Clarence Fanto

(PITTSFIELD, Mass., February 28, 2010) — The Sisters Parnas, violinist Madalyn and cellist Cicely, are poised for potential major careers in an increasingly superstar-oriented classical music business. The winsome Stephentown, N.Y., duo made that perfectly clear in their performance with the Albany Symphony, as heard at Pittsfield's Barrington Stage on a Saturday matinee, Feb. 27.

Under the supportive leadership of ASO Music Director David Alan Miller, the sisters — with a distinguished pedigree given that their grandfather is the famous cellist Leslie Parnas — demonstrated their technical prowess in a pair of lightweight but enjoyable showpieces.

The Muse and the Poet, a tuneful mini-double concerto by Saint-Saens, is rarely encountered. Written late in life during his 1909 vacation in Egypt, the composer depicted it as “a conversation between the two instruments instead of a debate between two virtuosos.”

The Parnas ladies turned this cotton-candy trifle into a thoroughly mesmerizing occasion as they traded virtuosic solos, as in a high-stakes tennis game between two pros, rather than a mere musical chat. Yet, there was no one upmanship, simply two mutually supportive performers romping through an atmospheric depiction of a poet stymied by writers' block who encounters her muse (a harp) and is inspired to respond with an initially subdued rhapsody that evolves into a joyous waltz.

After intermission, the sisters returned for a 10-minute Vivaldi Double Concerto of middle-drawer quality, at best. Yet it served as another opportunity for a demonstration of Parnasian proficiency. An evaluation of their interpretive skills and emotional depth must await more challenging repertoire.

Following liberal-arts education at the College of St. Rose in Albany, the home-schooled Parnases (Madalyn, 18, graduated while Cicely, 16, completed her freshman year) are heading for conservatory training next fall at the prestigious Indiana University where they'll work with two of the best, violinist-conductor Jaime Laredo and his wife, cellist Sharon Robinson. With skillful management and a reasonably limited concert schedule, they are likely to become sought-after performers on the solo, duo, chamber music and orchestral circuits.

The concert — attended by fewer than 100 listeners — was book-ended by performances of Schoenberg's lushly romantic, atypical *Transfigured Night* and Beethoven's jocular Symphony No. 8. Miller preceded the Schoenberg with an articulate, brief and informative preview, pointing out that while later works by the 12-tone composer tend to send audiences scurrying for the exits, this early piece (Op. 4) composed in 1899 — originally for string sextet — was highly influenced by the music of Brahms, Wagner, Mahler and Richard Strauss.

Miller is a skillful interpreter, but the Albany Symphony strings simply weren't up to the task. The unflattering, extra-dry Barrington Stage acoustics did the orchestra no favors, as each intonational lapse was all too apparent, as was the frequent lack of ensemble. Similarly, the Beethoven was accorded a vibrant, energetic reading by Miller, but the chamber-sized orchestra gave a thin, wan account that had occasional moments of sparkle but more frequent impressions of musical drudgery.

The lack of technical polish was all the more surprising, since the same program had been performed in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., and at the Troy [N.Y.] Savings Bank Music Hall, one of the region's acoustical gems. One can only speculate on the price exacted by the tottering economy on the orchestra's ability to attract, motivate and retain high-level players.

That said, it's encouraging that the ASO plans to continue a couple of performances per season in the Berkshires. This Barrington Stage outing was underwritten by Jack and Jane Fitzpatrick's High Meadow Foundation. The orchestra has been a vagabond this season, trying out several Berkshire venues following the box-office disappointment of its three-year Colonial Theatre venture, sponsored by Berkshire Bank.

The warmer, more resonant acoustics of the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center in Great Barrington would favor a better listening experience and might attract larger numbers of classical aficionados who make the venue a frequent off-season destination. Repertoire designed to showcase the ensemble's strengths rather than its weaknesses might also create a loyal audience base. As for the Parnas duo, their return performances in our region are awaited with keen anticipation.

Contributing editor Clarence Fanto reviews classical music for Berkshireliving.com.