

Albany Symphony Orchestra @ Troy Music Hall 2/26/10

By JOSEPH DALTON
Special to the Times Union

TROY – From the cloudy dream world of Schoenberg on through to the stomping grandiosity of Beethoven, Friday evening's concert of the Albany Symphony Orchestra at the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall progressed like one long crescendo.

The opener may have been more than a century old, but it was still a rather daring choice, typical of music director David Alan Miller. Schoenberg's "Verklarte Nacht" Op.4 predates his invention of serialism — "a turn to the dark side" as Miller aptly put it — but it's still darned creepy and shrill. The ensemble of 21 strings ebbed and flowed for half an hour. What heart the piece has probably resides in the prominent writing for the violas. Their tone had an intriguing wooden quality, but their intonation was questionable.

After the chill of the Schoenberg, when the young local musicians known as Duo Parnas walked on stage in giant ball gowns of peach and pink, it felt like the blooming of roses in winter. No less radiant was their playing, first in Saint-Saens' "The Muse and the Poet" and then after intermission in the B-flat double concerto by Vivaldi.

The form of the Saint-Saens wanders a bit and started as a dialogue more than a duet between the soloists, who were cushioned by a lush orchestra. The climax came with Cicely Parnas's climbing double stops on the cello, followed by a long singing line from her sister Madalyn on violin.

In the Vivaldi, they had a leaner but even more brilliant sound. During the central movement, it was just the duo with accompaniment from harpsichordist Greg Hayes and principal cellist Susan Libby. At less than 10 minutes in length, the whole concerto felt crisp and fresh.

As Miller walked on stage for the last time, it was obvious he was already inhabited by the commanding opening beats of Beethoven's Symphony No. 8, which he conducted from memory. In three out of the four movements, Beethoven lays it on strong, only eventually bestowing tiny moments of playful charm. In the Allegro it was with hushed pizzicatos in the strings. The intensity eases off in the second movement, but the busy work for the woodwinds wasn't always on cue and some exposed notes near the end squeaked like a mouse.

The harried finale didn't seem to always be under Miller's control, though he rightly halted the action for a series of mini grand pauses. The silence was as arresting as anything else in the night.

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

MUSIC REVIEW

Albany Symphony Orchestra with guests artists Madalyn and Cicely Parnas

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Where: Troy Savings Bank Music Hall

Duration: Two hours, 20 minutes.