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McGegan's Messiaen steals show : Music Academy guest composer shines, with Mozart, Schumann in the margins

JOSEF WOODARD, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT
July 21, 2008 7:34 AM

In the Music Academy of the West's current festival of public performances, music of the late, great French composer Olivier Messiaen has been rightfully holding a place of honor and homage, in this, his centennial year. Through the process of regular exposure to examples from the Messiaen canon, we're gaining a greater respect for the man who would be, and should be, considered one of the towering forces of 20th-century music.

Saturday night at Lobero Theatre, as part of the weekly encounters with the fine student Academy Festival Orchestra, the man on the podium was the internationally renowned Nicholas McGegan. This program was built around a late symphony by Mozart and an early model by Schumann -- his first symphony. And yet it was Messiaen's relatively short, but distinctively potent orchestral piece "Un sourire (A smile)" that stole the show, at least in terms of presenting lively musical discourse and challenging language.

As it turns out, things Mozartean presided over much of the evening. The main event in the concert's first half was a solidly played reading of Mozart's Symphony No. 36 in C, "Linz," and the Mozart theme continued with Jacques Ibert's fluffy confection "Hommage a Mozart" and Messiaen's 1989 piece, written in homage to Amadeus for his then-forthcoming bicentennial.

As Messiaen explained in a note about the piece, he sensed an implicit smile in Mozart's music, even in its darker moments. The same might be said of Messiaen's music, which conveys vitality and sometimes audacity, within its unique blend of religiosity, abiding nature lore and love, and his own private relationship with the Modernist muse.

Even in the compact setting of this orchestral piece, written at the age of 81, those particulars of the French composer's stylistic voice were evident from the first few measures of "Un sourire." Apart from his sculpting a personal language, blending terse and lyrical tonalities, sometimes in an incidentally jazzy way, Messiaen was infamously infatuated with birdsong, which can be more abstract than we romanticize it as being.

In "Un sourire," smooth textures and passages are interspersed with the natural jaggedness of birdsong-like elements and sparkly xylophone interjections. We can only hope these gifted students will find occasion to perform much more Messiaen in their professional lives, amidst the inherent conservatism and anti-Modern bias rampant in general public classical culture.

Overall on this night, Mr. McGegan led the orchestra with a supple, commanding hand. In the Mozart, the strings sounded a bit unfocused in the beginning, but steadily improved as it moved along. By the final movement, all was fully in order, and the ensemble sounded propulsive and purposeful, in the requisite classical manner needed here.

Schumann's first symphony, taking up the bulk of the concert's second half, has its own Mozartean stamp, especially compared to the often tormented composer's most angst-fueled writings. It was penned in 1941, around the same time he wed the love of his life, Clara Wiecks, and there was reason to smile, musically and otherwise.

Brooding and jubilant, by turns, Schumann's symphony -- and this week's orchestral encounter -- ended on an emphatic, grandly articulated high note.



For the latest installment of the weekly Academy Festival Orchestra concerts at Lobero Theatre, renowned conductor Nicholas McGegan led the ensemble in a program built around Mozart, Schumann and Messiaen.

DAVID BAZEMORE PHOTOS



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