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Review: Carey narrates with charm at Blossom

By Elaine Guregian

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Shakespeare or not, you can count on some things. Or did you really think that Drew Carey was going to get on a stage with his hometown orchestra and not cut loose for at least a moment?

The comedian and Cleveland native visited Blossom on Saturday night to narrate a much-condensed version of Shakespeare's play "A Midsummer Night's Dream," performing with the Cleveland Orchestra, two excellent vocal soloists (sopranos Mary Wilson and Anne-Carolyn Bird) and women of both the Blossom Festival Chorus and the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Chorus. After the famous "Wedding March" segment of Felix Mendelssohn's incidental music, heard at every traditional wedding, Carey slapped the side of his head and remarked — definitely off-book — "Like my cousin's wedding!"

Reportedly, the format for the Mendelssohn was devised for a production that Saturday night's guest conductor, Nicholas McGegan, has led before. Not to rain on anybody's parade (which did happen Saturday night, without deterring many in the enthusiastic audience seated on the lawn), but I found it hard to follow the narrative train of thought. Carey's lines represented such a fraction of the long and delightfully convoluted story about love and love spells gone awry that it wasn't easy to track a through-line. It was also hard to understand the chorus.

But the playing was first-rate and Carey had fun, actually falling over onto the podium in mock distress at one point. And despite slight blurring of the amplified sound, Carey was a good narrator, phrasing his lines for clarity and delivering them with conviction. For all his joking in an earlier interview ("I'll have to find out what a cowslip is"), he spoke Shakespeare's language with authority, slowing down after his initially too-fast delivery.

The whole evening's program was built around the idea of 19th-century musical responses to Shakespeare. McGegan, the British director of the excellent Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra in the San Francisco Bay area, showed an experienced command of the orchestra. He also distinguished himself with his down-to-Earth program biography; I salute him for being the first classical conductor I've seen to list his hobbies — solving crossword puzzles, tending roses and more — alongside the usual impressive resume items.

The program opened with a vivid performance of Carl Maria von Weber's Overture to "Oberon," a work whose quickness of spirit is close to Mendelssohn. The orchestra's principal flute, Joshua Smith, was the expressive soloist in "A Night Piece," a contemplative work for flute and strings by the American composer Arthur Foote. The writing is akin to that of Ralph Vaughan Williams, though with tangier harmonies, and Smith and the small orchestra made pretty work of it.

Arthur Sullivan, independent of his usual partner, W.S. Gilbert, wrote the Masquerade Suite from "The Merchant of Venice," which the orchestra played with special feeling for its Viennese waltz section. Carey was the star, but the evening's program was quietly enjoyable all around.

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