Written by Frederick Morden
Friday, 15 February 2013 13:12

- 39.95$ Lavalys Everest Ultimate 4.5 cheap oem
- Download Efreesky MagicTweak 4.11
- Discount - IMAGENOMIC Portraiture 2 for Adobe Photoshop MAC
- Buy Cheap DeskShare VideoEditMagic 4.3
- Download Adobe Creative Suite 4 Design Standard
- 19.95$ Aiseesoft Video Converter 3 MAC cheap oem
- Buy Lynda.com - Black and White with Lightroom and Photoshop (en)
- Buy Adobe ColdFusion Builder 2 MAC (en,ja)
- Download ABest Video to AVI MOV Converter
- Discount - Windows 7 All-in-One For Dummies
- Buy Rosetta Stone - Learn Irish (Level 1) (zh,en,fr,de,it,ja,ko,es)
- Buy Cheap Apple Mac OS X 10.7 Lion
- Discount - OriginLab OriginPro 8

We do silly things for love. This must be one of them.

In what Music Director and Conductor Mark Russell Smith termed a “fun experiment” at his February 7 “Inside the Music” lecture, the Quad City Symphony, for its “Valentine’s Day” Masterworks concerts, replaced classical-music repertoire for half of the program with tunes from the 1940s sung by a five-member swing group. Last year, we got Scheherazade; this year, we got the “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy.”

The orchestra was the opening act, performing Berlioz’s arrangement of Carl Maria von Weber’s *Invitation to the Dance*, Leonard Bernstein’s *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*, and Tchaikovsky’s “Waltz” from
Swan Lake
. During the second half, the orchestra served as backup band for vocal group Five by Design, which performed a variety of old-time pop selections including, among others, “Night & Day,”

“Begin the Beguine,” “The Trolley Song,” “Mairzy Doats,” and “Sing, Sing, Sing.”

I enjoy all kinds of music, and symphony orchestras have long attempted to attract new audiences by blending popular and classical music in their Pops concerts. Simply put, the swing music on the February program belonged in a Pops concert, and it diminished the Quad City Symphony's Masterworks series – whose traditional forms and repertoire are my balms against the temporal superficiality of what Mahler called “a garish world.”

The musical mismatch in conception was exacerbated in the February 9 Adler Theatre concert by the artistic disparity between the orchestra and vocal group, both in technical execution and ability to evoke an emotional response. Even judged only in its genre, Five by Design could not match the performance standard of the orchestra.

The musical highlight of the evening was the orchestra’s dramatic and compelling performance of Bernstein’s *Symphonic Dances*. It’s easily among the most demanding Broadway pit scores ever written, and the composer’s revised arrangement of dance excerpts for symphony orchestra strengthened both the complexity of the musical ideas and the raw impact of the drama.

Smith and the orchestra threw themselves into the effort with intensity and musical insight. The conductor’s contrasting dance tempos, critical for differentiating the rhythmic styles of each section, were spot-on, and his interpretive intuition with the piece’s popular-music styles made the performance captivating and musically exciting.

Giving the Bernstein tempos the right texture and character was an expanded six-player percussion section that drove the complicated, pulsating Latin rhythms with flair and technical mastery without burying the orchestra. The “Cha-Cha” had a fanciful feel, and the attention players gave by accenting important notes added charm and affability to the dance. In the “Rumble,” where the musical tension is found in tightly wound imitations of a single tune, the orchestra was perfectly together, making for a hair-raising musical fight of its own. With its wailing trumpets and smearing trombones, and the players emphatically shouting “Mambo!”, the orchestra, in a flat-out jazz chorus, rocked the Adler.

And then, suddenly, in an extreme change of character, they produced the haunting “Finale.”

With translucent, delicately balanced high string chords, beautifully effective dissonant notes in the woodwinds, and the fading reiterations of the “Somewhere” thematic fragment, the orchestra brought Bernstein’s masterful score to a sensitive close. After a breath-holding pause, the clearly moved audience gave Smith and the orchestra an appreciative standing ovation in the middle of the first half.

Ending the orchestra’s portion of the concert was a carefully shaped and properly nuanced “Waltz” from Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*. Smith and the orchestra clearly demarcated the two main thematic structural components and the rhythmic variations in their performance. The intricate interplay between the strings and woodwinds was buoyant and playful. The accents in the trumpet solo, although unmarked, were performed with tonal clarity in the correct traditional manner, with stresses on alternating primary and syncopated beats. The general accelerando in the last section of the piece, typically inserted when performed without dancers, was well-measured in tempo and ensemble dynamics, and opened the musical door for the powerful restatements of thematic sequences in the trombones and tuba that brought the dance to an exciting and decisive end.

A famous Pops conductor once said: “A symphony orchestra is the largest, most complex acoustically designed instrument yet invented. But add one microphone, and it all goes to hell.” And that was, in part, the problem for Five by Design. Singing the songs of the Second World War swing era, vocal clarity, part balance, and intonation proved to be elusive most of the evening. It might have been different in the rest of the hall, but from where I sat in the balcony, poor sound quality made the close harmony difficult to hear clearly.

Uneven volume between the singers obscured the melody within the tight vocal sound. Less-interesting harmonic parts of Lerner & Loewe’s “Almost Like Being in Love,” for example, were louder than the elegant melodic sequences of the tune. As the singers moved (sort of dancing), the balance problem shifted from one part to another – the bass too loud, then the alto, then the tenor.

Five by Design’s sidemen on piano, drums, and an amplified upright bass – the Quad City Symphony bass section wasn’t used – were steady but without much dynamic variation. The bass remained consistently penetrating even when the orchestra was featured playing Calvin Custer’s beautifully expressive medley of Duke Ellington tunes. The balance improved when individual singers stepped forward for “Mona Lisa” and “I’ll Be Seeing You,” allowing the sophistication of the arrangements to be heard, but these sections, unfortunately, revealed vocal instability and pitch frailty.

Five by Design was at its best in Evans & Loeb's "Rosie the Riveter" (a World War II salute to women's home-front work efforts) sung a cappella, with a vocal walking bass and the other singers pretending to play a trumpet, trombone with hand vibrato, and – I'm guessing – a clarinet. The song was both well-executed and musically fun. With "In the Mood," balance, prominent melody, and solid intonation made the swing style and vocal blend more persuasive.

Period costumes, velvety sing-song "radio" announcements, advertising jingles, unison and partnered dancing movements, and brief comic bits gave a sense of historical context and nostalgia. Still, even at its best, Five by Design's performance was more style than substance, and essentially incongruous with the symphony's artistic excellence.

Ultimately, the concert forcefully revealed the appeal and artistry of American classical music, but also a disheartening fact: There was more pop music in this concert than American classical music for the entire season.

The next Masterworks concerts will be held March 9 (at the Adler Theatre) and 10 (at Augustana College's Centennial Hall), featuring Stravinsky's Rite of Spring *and Mussorgsky's* P ictures at an Exhibition
. For more information, visit
QCSymphony.com
.

Frederick Morden is a retired orchestra-music director, conductor, composer, arranger, educator, and writer who has served on the executive board of the Conductors Guild. He can be reached at f.morden@mchsi.com .