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With a diverse, rich sampling of chamber music in its second Masterworks concert of the season, the Quad City Symphony on October 26 provided sensitive musical insight into the personal lives of composers. No symphonies, concertos, or philosophical tone poems here; rather the program included instrumental music for the stage, and vocal music about relationships with family and friends. The performance was consistently strong throughout with a strange musical shuffle near the end that almost ruined the warm, cozy atmosphere the musicians worked so hard to create.

To “Concert Conversations” participants sitting in the Adler just before the program, Music Director and Conductor Mark Russell Smith explained that “in the old days, concerts were bookended by big works and filled in with bits and pieces of other works.” Franz Schubert’s *Overture to Rosamunde* and Richard Strauss’ *Suite from Le Bourgeois Gentlehomme* might have been the “bookends” of the program, but the soul was found in the “bits and pieces” sung by guest soprano Sarah Shafer.

Accompanied by the orchestra, Shafer sang *Knoxville Summer of 1915*, Samuel Barber’s nostalgic reliving of his childhood and the illness looming over his father; Mozart’s concert aria “Ch’io mi scordi di te?” (“You ask that I forget you?”) honoring a loyal friend, perhaps a lover; and Richard Strauss’ art song “Morgen” (“Tomorrow”), a gift for his new bride that anticipated their happiness together. With texts in German, Italian, and English, these pieces were tied together by a common theme – personal relationships in the composers’ lives – that, combined with Shafer’s impressive voice, made her performance artistically cohesive.

Soul in the Bits and Pieces: The Quad City Symphony, October 26 at the Adler

Written by Frederick Morden

Wednesday, 06 November 2013 09:28

Shafer has that special sound, a tone color that is immediately warm and inviting with the flexibility to do just about anything – an Italian sports car with great power in a small frame. She has the depth to both sing Strauss' tender emotive arcs in "Morgen" and create the musical ambiance and conflicting emotions of Barber's childhood as seen through the wisdom of an adult. But it was in the intricately difficult scales, leaps, and ornamentation of the instrumental-like writing of Mozart that she revealed the disciplined vocal technique that separates her from other singers.

Shafer made it sound easy, but singing this Mozart is like dancing around rattlesnakes; there is no time to linger. Musical intervallic leaps high and low, a glimpse of pathos, moments of pause, racing and *ritenuto* – she was everywhere, showing the vocal dexterity to be light in one instant, intense the next, all with the pitch certainty of a keyboard.

Instead of performing the printed page, Shafer sang in the late-18th Century style with quick, unwritten changes of tempo and dynamics bringing the text to life. She inserted and emphasized dissonant one-tone appoggiaturas here and there, following old performance practices that colored the music with delight, sorrow, and passion. She accomplished difficult turns and mordents, adding notes to an already blithing array of scales and arpeggios. With impressive physical and vocal strength, she sustained long, extended musical phrases, articulating every note of the melismatic passages (parts with many pitches on a single syllable). All these changes made her performance not only more dramatic and suspenseful but also more authentic than performing unaltered music.

Adding color to the orchestral sound and anchoring the bulk of the work was guest pianist Joel Fan, who improvised, in the Classical style, a brief cadenza just before the large "Allegretto" section and then nailed the virtuosic accompanying scale figures and arpeggiated flourishes that Mozart had written for himself to perform.

While the Italian text for Mozart was heard in bold relief against the orchestra, American poet James Agee's words in Barber's music were marginally intelligible from where I sat. This was a fundamental problem considering that Barber's music not only accompanied the words but amplified their meaning through tone painting, such as sudden agitated music with leaps of ninths and seconds representing the illness of Barber's father, and noisy metallic textures for the electrical sparks of the streetcar mentioned in the text.

Barber's thick mixture of harmony and orchestration competed against or blurred the similar

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timbre of Shafer's voice. Tucked between the concertmaster and conductor, her sound seemed, at times, swallowed up by the instruments that almost surrounded her. By contrast, Mozart's hide-and-seek Classical style, alternately jumping into and out of the musical spotlight, was more effective with this staging arrangement.

Despite the moments of imbalance between the ensemble and the singer, the orchestra's playing of Barber was wonderful, with its Southern atmospheric color – a vivid, steamy summer evening in Tennessee. The orchestra members shaped the opening bars with warmth and lyric tenderness, and soloists emerged with artfully sculpted musical phrases, like a quiet, playful conversation among family members. The insightful musical dialogues included the oboe and English horn with the cello section, melodic fragments in the horn, a solo cello with answering strings, and the blend of solo clarinet with flute – all musically swaying around Shafer's voice.

If the imbalance in Barber was caused by a combination of the music and the placement of the singer, a larger problem was the bizarre and wholly avoidable choice of program order. The second half of the concert featured nine selections from Strauss' opera *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, but after the first seven movements, the orchestra changed its seating configuration and personnel – with some players leaving the stage and others joining – and re-tuned. When Shafer returned to the stage, the audience greeted her with awkward clapping. The soloist performed two vocal pieces with the orchestra and left the stage to appreciative applause, and then the players returned to their original seats for the last two movements of the Strauss, closing the concert.

Despite the interruption of Strauss, the orchestra demonstrated superb musicianship as an ensemble and individuals. The flutes produced an effective contrast between abruptly accented notes and a lyric duet in the "Minuet." The bold statements by the bass trombone and bravura trumpet arpeggios in "The Fencing Master" were impressive. The clarinet and bassoon doubling of the melody in the fifth movement was not only perfect intonation, but it carefully delineated the musical line with even intensity and blend, a resonant mixture added to Strauss' rich harmony. Tasteful percussion – soft bass drum, cymbals, and orchestra bells – added color and a martial feel to the "Courante."

The concert effectively showcased the range and skill of both the orchestra and the soloist through diverse music from four style periods. But the decision to break up the closing piece was destabilizing: logistically awkward, self-evidently disruptive to the Strauss suite, and a drain on the concert's momentum.

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The Quad City Symphony's next Masterworks concerts will be held Saturday, December 7, at the Adler Theatre and Sunday, December 8, at Augustana College's Centennial Hall. The program features Jennifer Higdon's Violin Concerto and Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2, with guest conductor Alasdair Neale and violinist Naha Greenholtz. For more information, visit QCSymphony.com

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