

Entertainment

Alexandria symphony a 'Dream'

February 5, 2007

The ongoing Shakespeare in Washington festival traveled across the Potomac Saturday evening to Alexandria, where the Alexandria Symphony Orchestra presented an inventive and highly entertaining concert of symphonic music based on the Bard's enduringly popular comedy "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

The program, performed at Northern Virginia Community College's Schlesinger Concert Hall under the baton of Kim Allen Kluge, included works by an unexpected trio of composers: Benjamin Britten, Elvis Costello, and Felix Mendelssohn by way of German-American film composer Erich Korngold.

The orchestral excerpts from Mr. Britten's 1960 opera, based on Shakespeare's play, are probably most familiar to today's concertgoers. Written in an easy, accessible style, these interludes conjure up visions of a misty forest where strange things can and do happen.

More intriguing, however, was the crossover orchestral work by pop music star Elvis Costello. His "Il Sogno" ("The Dream") was composed recently on commission from an Italian ballet company. The music, issued on CD somewhat over a year ago, reveals a surprisingly inventive side of this once-and-future rocker. The score does not rival Beethoven, but it exhibits a surprising grasp of motif and nuance. The ASO, aided by narrator Robert Aubry Davis' readings from the original play, gave a versatile and lively air to Mr. Costello's score in this, the Washington-area premiere of the work.

Perhaps even more fascinating was the orchestra's performance of Mr. Korngold's music for the 1935 Max Reinhardt motion picture of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." This legendary film's A-list cast included Jimmy Cagney as a bumbling Bottom and Mickey Rooney as a rather devious Puck. Mr. Korngold's superb score was actually a tailoring, with original additions and development, of Mendelssohn's popular incidental music to the play.

The orchestra hit a brick wall, however, when trying to find a copy of the score to perform. Like so much early Hollywoodiana, it appeared for a time to have been lost. But, according to ASO general manager Adrien Finlay, music librarian Joe Tersero did a yeomanlike job tracking it down to a dusty Warner Bros. archive at the University of Southern California.

With permission from Warner Bros. and with the aid of a part-time USC archivist and violinist-composer Gary Dov Gertzweig, the desired excerpts from the score and the accompanying parts -- which occasionally had to be fleshed-out from sketches -- were painstakingly assembled and arrived just in the nick of time for rehearsals.

The results were well worth the effort. Mr. Korngold's score is Mendelssohn tastefully updated with 20th century punch and invention. The ASO performed this absolutely charming music smoothly and with great attention to nuance and detail.

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MAXIMUM RATING: FOUR STARS

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