

OTTAWA CITIZEN

NACO turns ambivalent Mendelssohn symphony into lively affair

By Richard Todd
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National Arts Centre Orchestra

Featuring Carlo Rizzi, conductor and Simone Dinnerstein, piano

At Southam Hall, National Arts Centre

Wednesday, January 5, 2011

OTTAWA -- Mendelssohn was undeniably a great composer who produced several masterpieces, but not everything he wrote falls into that category. A case in point is his *Symphony no. 2 in B-flat, op. 52*, entitled *Lobesgesang* or *Hymn of Praise*. It was the major work on Wednesday night's National Arts Centre Orchestra concert.

It's by no means a bad work and has moments of real beauty, but it is over an hour long and wears out its welcome well before the final double bar. It was commissioned to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the invention of moveable type by Johann Gutenberg; however, the text is entirely religious in nature, mentioning neither type nor Gutenberg. It was the last-written of the composer's five symphonies, but its publisher chose to scramble the chronology for one reason or another.

The great Italian conductor Carlo Rizzi was on the podium and made the piece sound better than one almost ever hears. The first three movements, entirely instrumental, were especially fine. Rizzi's grasp of Mendelssohn's idiom is altogether exemplary and the orchestra provided him with some of its finest playing in recent memory. Almost as impressive was the chorus of about 180 voices drawn from four of Ottawa's best choral ensembles. Their sound was unified and, not surprisingly, most imposing.

The redoubtable trio of soloists included sopranos Donna Brown and Amber Wagner, along with tenor Thomas Cooley. Their contributions were generally up to snuff with the rest of the performers.

Earlier the program began with the overture to Schumann's unsuccessful opera, *Genoveva*. It's a wonderful curtain-raiser and conductor Rizzi led a sympathetic and expert account of it.

Simone Dinnerstein is a New York, or more specifically a Brooklyn pianist who has been making quite a splash with her recitals and recordings of Bach. Her rendition of that composer's *Concerto no. 1 in D minor* was the highlight of the program. Intelligent and eminently musical, it also featured fine orchestral playing.

When an emerging Bach pianist comes to Ottawa, it's impossible not to think of our very established Bach pianist, Angela Hewitt.

Dinnerstein's playing isn't much like Hewitt's but the two women have this much in common: They make it sound as though the concerto were written for a modern piano rather than the harpsichord. In any case Dinnerstein's Bach stands tall on its own account.

The program will be repeated Thursday evening at 8 p.m. in Southam Hall.

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