The Musical Gourmet

Stream of consciousness & magnificence at Zellerbach

Berkeley Symphony finally gets its season-opening concert

By Joseph Gold

The mood was festive in Zellerbach Hall this past Sunday afternoon. A large and enthusiastic audience cheered the Berkeley Symphony as it embarks on its Golden Jubilee season, exactly two years to the day since its last run in Zellerbach. The good fortune was to have Joseph Young as conductor. The repertoire was chosen carefully and, as such, could only happen in Berkeley. Considering it as a stream of consciousness concert, it made me wonder: what if James Joyce were a composer and James Joyce as composer and music director.

First came Mark Grey’s Soundscape 1. With the stage darkened and voices of protest emanating as the center of attention, it conjured up a terrifying experience of being an innocent bystander during one of the violent political-social demonstrations near Zellerbach in the ’60s. The stream of consciousness moved on seamlessly to Morton Gould’s Protest. Not realizing the context of the programming, I was impressed by the Symphony’s brass and woodwind sections. Their resonance was truly impressive.

The program moved on seamlessly to Soundscape 2, also by Mark Grey. Once again the feeling of terrible trepidation returned. And then the music moved on to composer Derek Skyek’s As Water, Freedom, commissioned by Berkeley Symphony. The suite of four pieces was as seamless as it was meaningful.

With a brief word of introduction by conductor Joseph Young, the orchestra is launched into Finlandia, the masterwork of Finnish composer Jean Sibelius written in 1899. An entire chapter could be written about the importance of this composition. The orchestra played it heroically. Perhaps the soft sections should have been played softer, but my thoughts were redirected to Sibelius himself. While I did not know this stupendous genius personally, I have been a friend of his grandson for many years. The stories I told about being with grandfather Sibelius became even more vivid. I vowed to be a grandfather like he was.

After intermission the concert resumed with Lollapalooza by Berkeley composer John Adams who enjoys enthusiastic popularity. Once again, the stream of consciousness resumed and I was reminded of the great American composer Charles Ives. As an orchestra, the Berkeley Symphony is at the top of its game. It is quite obvious that the conductor, Joseph Young, is an inspiring influence, and it is for this reason that Berkeley Symphony was able to engage him as their music director in 2019.

The orchestra’s most inspiring playing came at the end with Igor Stravinsky’s evocative Firebird suite. Of particular note were beautiful solos played by obist Bennie Cottle and bassoonist Rufus Olivier. Once again, the stream of consciousness overcame reality. I remembered what friend Orrin Watt from the San Francisco Symphony told me about working with Stravinsky. I also remembered the superhuman artistry of violinist Jascha Heifetz playing the Berceuse from the Firebird. How I wished the first violin section knew this recording. But then I thought of the beautiful playing of Cottle and Olivier. Joseph Young united everything into a beautiful stream of consciousness.

The program of the concert was unified so many things. It graphed with the socio-political questions of fate. Needless to say, all who were involved relished the implied connections and reaped the rewards.

Epilogue

The entire scene was painted on a vast musical canvas, reminding me of something I read so many years ago. It was a description of Ivan the Terrible in an opera by Rimsky-Korsakov.

On the stage and in the orchestra, there had been a steady diminuendo. The waiting multitudes stood hushed and still... The tones muted to a murmur. The audience waited. Centuries dropped away, and we became part of the scene. The suspense was oppressive. With a superhuman effort, the body of the decapitated Ivan the Terrible straightened, and inch by inch the slack reins taken up. Finally, with a majestic deliberation, the eyelids opened wide and the personification of power and ruthless evil looked straight at his people, both on the stage and in the audience.

At first low and indefinite, the tones acquired depth and quality. Vitality and eloquence from the dim past was made convincing and compelling. It was surely one of those portraits that hang in the gallery of memory tarnished by the passing of time.