

San Francisco Classical Voice
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Midsummer Elegance

By Heuwell Tircuit

Mozart's music and reputation were extremely well-served Friday evening in Herbst Theater as George Cleve conducted a beautifully built concert of the Midsummer Mozart Festival. The concert offered two well-known major masterpieces and two short but rarely encountered arias. To the program, which was dedicated to the late soprano Beverly Sills, Cleve and his soprano soloist added a special little surprise: an encore aria popularized in the States by Sills.

Cleve opened with the large Serenade No. 7 in D Major, K. 250, the Haffner Serenade, including the optional opening March, K. 249 (also in D major). The violin concerto nestled within the serenade featured Robin Hansen as soloist. Following intermission, soprano Elspeth Franks sang two lesser-known Mozart arias: *Chi sà, chi sà, quai sia* (K. 582) and *Vado, ma dove* (K. 583). Then came the encore, the sensational *Ruhe sanft, mein holdes Leben* aria from Mozart's unfinished comic opera, *Zaide* (K. 344).

Franks returned to the stage with mezzo-soprano Ruthann Lovetang, tenor Sanford Dole, bass David Miller, and the Cantabile Chorale for a performance of the Mass No. 15 in C Major (K. 317), the Coronation Mass.

Running the better part of an hour in length, the eight-movement Haffner Serenade, together with its sidekick march, present what amount to a full concert. You have the march as prelude, the first movement of which is, in essence, a bravura symphony; a three-movement violin concerto; then a light intermezzo in the form of a menuetto; and finally the remaining three movements of that symphony.

By any standards, this was virtuoso creativity, which requires virtuoso playing, as well. That was accomplished in full measure at Friday's performance, with the experienced Cleve setting ideal tempos, plus giving careful attention to articulation, balance, and dynamics. All those years of studying with Monteux and Szell paid off for Cleve.

Deeply Moving Quiet

What's always surprising about Mozart is his capacity to surprise. He never fails to achieve this, no matter how familiar the score — with a few exceptions, such as *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* in my case. The order of movements and sheer weight of originality in the Haffner always give me a little jolt. The menuetto, second of the violin concerto's three movements, is suddenly in a dark, minor key. (In a serenade written to celebrate a wedding? Unheard of.) And bravos to violinist Hansen for stylish and elegance playing of those soloist movements, avoiding any hint of Romantic goo.

Franks' two arias were composed especially for singer Louise Villeneuve, who didn't like her role in an opera by one Martín y Soler (not to be confused with harpsichord composer Antonio Soler). Mozart's arias were thus inserted into Soler's opera on a "Keep the soprano happy at all costs" basis. Mozart's arias doubtlessly improved the opera, for these are late creations, rich in mastery. The first of the two arias, K. 582, is not unlike the music Mozart crafted for his Figaro score, only a tad more florid. The second of the two contains more recitative and, again, more vocal fireworks.

But what stole the show for Franks was the exquisite Zaide excerpt, long a Sills favorite. Ruhe sanft is likely the most ravishingly beautiful of all Mozart arias, and that's saying something. It floats in a kind of heavenly dream, and Franks did it well indeed. Sills she's not, but then who is? Nevertheless, what I heard moved me deeply.

Why Mozart stopped work on Zaide has always puzzled me, since it was nearly completed when he set it aside. What it lacks are an overture, a finale, and the spoken dialogue between numbers. The rest, about 90 percent of the music, exists. There have been occasional stagings, borrowing one of the short Mozart symphonies as an overture. It has even been recorded, proving that Zaide contains first-rate stuff and could be a certain hit. It's all a great mystery, and it makes absolutely no sense to me that he never returned to it.

By contrast with the Haffner, the Mass in C Major is relatively short. The ceremonies for any coronation tend to be long, so lengthy musical additions are usually ruled out. Even monarchs don't care to sit around in all that uncomfortable regalia and heavy crowns for long without a drink. This was no time for the composer to stop to sniff the texts. Just move 'em along and that will do nicely, thank you.

The music is largely ceremonial, in the elevated fashion of the times, having been set for a large orchestra of the period plus four soloists and chorus, and using the standard text for the Ordinary of the Mass. But Mozart, always the subversive, snuck in a few surprises, such as little pinches of acute dissonance in the choral writing. The chorus was fine, as were the orchestra and the soloists when singing as a unit. But as soloists the two gentlemen sounded like — well, choral singers. They were fine in ensemble work, but soloists they're not.

Conductor Sans a Major Post

Besides the music, the wonder of the evening was George Cleve. He has largely worked around Europe in recent years, and has been much honored in Vienna, Paris, Moscow, and other major cities. That he does not currently head a major American orchestra is scandalous. Why the powers-that-be keep appointing foreign so-sos to important posts confuses me, since there are so many first-class Americans around.

The irony, of course, lies in the number of Americans who have been heading important European orchestras for over 30 years. Still, things are shifting. San Francisco, Saint Louis, Dallas, Boston, and, most recently, New York have all appointed American conductors. Chicago and Philadelphia? Never.

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Comments

Thank you for your comments about Maestro Cleve. These two Midsummer Mozart concerts were the first time I have heard him conduct live and I was extremely impressed and plan to attend concerts he conducts in the future.