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Posted at 2:32 a.m., Sunday, October 14, 2007

Music Review: Honolulu Symphony at Hawaii Theatre

Ruth Bingham Special to The Advertiser

This season with the Honolulu Symphony is turning out to be a mini-course in acoustics.

Audiences do not often spend time thinking about acoustics. It is generally an issue between musicians and architects, one that

surfaces briefly at the opening of a new hall and then fades into the background.

Saturday's concert in Hawaii Theatre, a treasure of a building renovated to its 1920s splendor, brought acoustics back into the foreground.

Led by Guest Conductor Julian Wachner and pared down to fewer than 50 musicians, the Symphony presented Haydn and Beethoven as they cannot be heard in Blaisdell.

In some ways, Hawaii Theatre provided a more "authentic" performance: The smaller orchestra was closer to the sizes used by Haydn and Beethoven, but it sounded large because of the space. The building's smaller size, higher, shallower seating, and ornate decor recalled the ambience of older European halls. Even Concert Conversations afterward, held in a long, narrow reception room, felt 19th-century-ish: intimate, but with musicians in tuxedos standing around.

Concert Conversations clearly benefitted from the intimacy of the new venue, with more questions and discussion than ever before. It's a pity Blaisdell lacks something similar.

That intimacy had an even greater impact on the music. Without Blaisdell's expansive shape and airspace, the music sounded unmixed, almost "raw," as though the audience were seated amidst the orchestra, hearing independent lines from all directions, instead of in that homogenized blend so emblematic of modern orchestras. The Symphony's sound in Hawaii Theatre underscored inner lines and secondary parts, which can so easily blend into oblivion in a larger hall.

That, at least, is how it sounded in the loge. In a hall such as Hawaii Theatre, sound can change dramatically depending on where one is seated.

The Symphony's Hawaii Theatre sound was at its best in Beethoven's "Egmont" Overture and especially in Haydn's "London" Symphony, No.104. Wachner presented clean, well-balanced, and well-thought-out interpretations that were both exciting and engaging.

The strings reigned supreme in this concert, thanks to the section

chairs: Ignace Jang, Concertmaster; Hung Wu, second violins; Mark Butin, violas; Mark Votapek, 'cellos; and Kirby Nunez, string basses. Of particular note among the wind solos was Paul Barrett's tasteful support of the strings in the second movement of the Haydn.

Hawaii Theatre was least kind to Beethoven's C Major Mass, which squeezed orchestra, chorus, soloists, and conductor onto a stage designed for half as many, which had the soloists literally tripping on and off for bows. The Honolulu Symphony Chorus, capable of rattling "fortissimos" in the much larger Blaisdell hall, sounded good but apparently lost most of its power into the fly space above the stage.

After the concert, Wachner commented on how difficult it was for the musicians – orchestral and choral – to hear: "There were many, many challenges: listening in a different way, and being so cramped. It doesn't sound good on stage, but it sounds good in the [hall]. If there had been a shell, that might have helped."

Whatever the Symphony's struggles, the sound in the hall was different, but good. In some ways, it was even better than the larger, more blended sound in Blaisdell. Especially loves passages included the "Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine" section of the "Credo"; the opening of "Gloria"; the sibilant entrances in the opening of "Sanctus"; and a clarinet solo by James Moffitt. The evening's glory turned out to be mezzo-soprano Laura Vlasak Nolen. Remember that name; you will probably hear it frequently in the future. Her voice was quite simply stunning: large, rich, warm butterscotch, beautifully placed. If Beethoven had known she was going to sing, he would have composed an extra movement just for her.