

"Dido" Dispositive that Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra's Baroque Series Should Be Annual Event

Posted in: Reviews

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Wall-to-wall applause, Fanuccio buttons and teary eyes all played a part in Sunday afternoon's Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra concert at Memorial Hall.

Music director Mischa Santora led the 23-piece CCO in the second of two Baroque Series concerts this season. It was both a delectable concert and a dispositive argument that a baroque series should be a regular part of every CCO season.

The concert was also a collaboration with the Vocal Arts Ensemble, itself a much anticipated annual event.

Vocal Arts Ensemble music director Earl Rivers Earl Rivers, retiring after 20 years as the VAE's visionary music director, received a warm tribute from Santora and the audience. It was his final concert at the helm of the VAE. Rivers is director of choral studies and head of the division of ensembles and conducting at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music.

On the program were Handel's Coronation Anthem No. 4, "Let Thy Hand Be Strengthened," Bach's Cantata No. 202 (Wedding Cantata) and a concert version of Henry Purcell's 1689 "Dido and Aeneas."

No wonder the hall was packed.

Sporting the Fanuccio buttons were members of tenor Mark Panuccio's fan club.

The popular Panuccio, a Cincinnati-based tenor on the cusp of stardom, sang Aeneas in Purcell's opera about the Trojan hero who stopped by Carthage on his way to found Rome and broke Queen Dido's heart. His act II aria, "Jove's commands shall be obeyed," a moment of

plaintive beauty in which Aeneas regretfully accedes to the gods' directive to get moving pronto (actually the Sorceress in disguise as Mercury), trailed off slowly against hesitant notes by the harpsichord. (Panuccio will sing Edgardo in Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor for Cincinnati Opera in June.)

As Dido, soprano Soon Cho was regal in bearing, with vocal endowments to match.

The tears were listener response to her heart-wrenching performance of "When I Am Laid in Earth," the queen's famous Lament as Aeneas leaves her to fulfill his destiny in Italy. Making it even more affecting, Cho sank to her knees, her hand clutching her heart.

Soon Cho, Panuccio, soprano Joelle Harvey as Belinda and mezzo-soprano Liza Forrester as the Sorceress are all products of the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music's renowned vocal program. (Cho and Forrester were secretaries to Mao Tse-tung in John Adams' "Nixon in China" for Cincinnati Opera last summer.)

Soprano Joelle Harvey was ideally cast as Dido's confidant Belinda and also as soloist in Bach's Wedding Cantata. Her sweet, lilting voice and comely appearance lent themselves perfectly to the awakening of spring and love in the Cantata. CCO principal oboist Christopher Philpotts provided warm, enveloping solos in her arias "Weichet nur betrübte Schatten" ("Dissipate, you troublesome shadows") and "Sich üben in Lieben" ("To be accustomed in love"), as did concertmistress Anna Reider in "Wenn die Frühlingslüfte streichen" ("When the springtime breezes caress").

Principal cellist Patrick Binford enhanced the charm of "Phoebus eilt mit schnellen Pferden" ("Phoebus hastes with rapid horses") with his lightly tramping basso continuo, while Christina Haan presided expertly at the harpsichord.

Purcell's exquisite opera, barely 45 minutes long, was as vivid pictorially as could be desired in a concert presentation. (Santora acted as novice stage

director, he said). "Costumes" were elegant and appropriate, Cho in a long, rust-colored gown, Harvey in a simple taupe dress, Panuccio in black shirt and trousers. Forrester was positively campy as the Sorceress in black gown and gloves with lots of "ice" (diamond jewelry) and white makeup.

VAE members Debra Van Engen and Alison Acord as the two witches, Esther Nam as the second woman in act II, and Jeffrey Stivers as a boisterous sailor sang and acted with skill and zest from their positions behind the orchestra.

The 24-voice VAE, prepared by Rivers, had a starring role as Carthaginians, commentators, a chorus of mischievous witches and Aeneas' lusty crew. Their "echo" chorus as they prepared to wreak a thunderstorm on the lovers was delivered in delightfully mocking tones

There were many colorful dramatic touches: Panuccio and Cho, all smiles, walking hand-in-hand across the stage, nuzzling as they take shelter during the storm and sparring realistically as Aeneas announced his departure. Forrester owned some of the choice moments, turning at one point to "conduct" the chorus of witches along with Santora.

Santora led a historically informed performance, the strings playing largely vibrato-less and sometimes close to the bridge for a whistling effect. He worked closely with the performers and was Cho's co-equal partner in Dido's lament, supporting her with an almost chokingly painful accompaniment (the ground bass theme is the same one Bach used in "Crucifixus" in his B Minor Mass). The VAE summed it all up in the final chorus, "With drooping wings you Cupids come," leaning achingly on "never" in "keep here your watch and never part" as Cho walked slowly offstage.

The performance of "Dido and Aeneas" was dedicated to former CCO music director Gerhard Samuel who died March 25 in Seattle. It was the Samuel who brought concert opera to the CCO (Handel's "Rinaldo," Mozart's

"Zaide") and instituted its annual collaborations with CCM.

Handel's Coronation Anthem No. 4, drawn from verses 14 and 15 of Psalm 89, made a fitting opener with its sighing, heartfelt appeal on behalf of the king to "let mercy and truth go before thy face," crowned by a joyous "Allelujah." (The anthem is part of a set written for the coronation of King George II of England in 1727.) Though considerably downsized from its Westminster Abbey premiere (47 voices in the choir, with an orchestra said to have approached 200), it sounded fine in 612-seat Memorial Hall.

The 2008-09 VAE season, announced in the concert program, will be led by three guest conductors and Rivers as follows:

* Oct. 4, Cathedral Basilica, Covington. Oct. 5, Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati. Faure, Requiem. James McMillan, Te Deum. Donald Nally, chorus master of Lyric Opera of Chicago, guest conductor.

* Dec. 12-14, St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, Anderson. St. Boniface Catholic Church, Northside. St. Peter in Chains Cathedral, Cincinnati. Britten, "A Ceremony of Carols." Elizabeth Motter, harp. Elmer Thomas (founding conductor of the VAE), guest conductor.

* March 22, Memorial Hall. CCO collaboration. Folk music theme, including Chen Yi's "A Set of Chinese Folk Songs" and Alice Parker's "Kentucky Psalms." Rivers.

* May 1, Knox Presbyterian Church, Hyde Park. May 3, St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Montgomery. Music by Canadian composer R. Murray Schaffer. Brett Scott, assistant professor of conducting, CCM, guest conductor.