



Symphony, Harvey provide enjoyable tribute to Felix Mendelssohn

By Sean McHugh | Kalamazoo Gazette

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KALAMAZOO — On Sunday afternoon at Kalamazoo College's Light Fine Arts Center, the Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra presented another of its "The World Of ..." concerts. This time it celebrated the Bicentennial of Felix Mendelssohn's birth (1809).

Choosing a handful of the great German romantic composer's works, KSO Director Raymond Harvey wove a splendid narrative around the music, speaking before each selection was played. Employing overhead image projection and a number of props, he told the remarkable story of Mendelssohn; first as a child prodigy, no less the genius than Mozart himself.

Proving his point, Harvey led the KSO through a performance of Mendelssohn's brilliant Overture to "A Midsummer Night's Dream," written when the composer was only 17.

It was a joy to hear the KSO, albeit reduced to about half its number, in the intimate and lively confines of the arts center. Hearing the buzz of woodwind reeds, the horsehair of bows on strings, and the slightest nuances of dynamics and articulation gave such life and presence to the sound.

The lively acoustics also present problems in performance, such as moments when winds and percussion overbalanced the strings. This is unfortunate in Mendelssohn's works which rely so heavily on delicate string passages. And, when those delicate passages were exposed, the acoustics are unforgiving to rare instances of faulty intonation and less than clean, crisp articulation.

Harvey chose Mendelssohn's String Quartet Op. 13, No. 2 in A Minor to suggest Beethoven's influence on the composer. Although it bears similarities to Beethoven's Quartet in A Minor, Op. 132, the Op. 13 stands apart with one of Mendelssohn's own songs worked into its texture. The Op. 13 was tastefully played by the KSO's Burdick-Thorne Quartet: Julia Neckermann and Lisa Williams, violins; Grace Byrd, viola; and David Peshlakai, cello. Neckermann led them with a beautiful, pure tone, relying mostly on bow speed and placement for expression rather than force.

Mendelssohn's Overture to "The Fair Melusina" is little known today, but Harvey used it to demonstrate the composer's penchant for setting tales to music. He also showed us that Melusina, a mermaid, is now one of our most ubiquitous commercial symbols, the Starbuck's logo.

In remarks to the Wedding March from "A Midsummer Night's Dream," Harvey created an intrigue by suggesting that Mendelssohn may not have been the forthright husband and father that history has often portrayed. Incriminating evidence suggests that he was completely infatuated with the soprano Jenny Lind, known as the "Swedish Nightingale," and desperately wanted to marry her.

Harvey made the afternoon very enjoyable, keeping the audience informed as well as entertained. He and the KSO also delivered a very worthy musical tribute to Mendelssohn.

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