

Academy pays tribute to its tradition

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musicreview

The Music Academy of the West paid its respects to tradition last weekend. Under the musical direction of Randall Behr and the stage direction of Chas

Rader-Shieber, the academy's student singers gave a solid and cohesive performance of Richard Strauss' opera "Ariadne Auf Naxos" Friday at the Lobero Theatre. In the first of two performances, the young vocalists proved their maturity and sophistication, as well as how far the festival/school has come in 45 years.

Back in 1955, "Ariadne Auf Naxos" became the first opera produced as part of the Music Academy, selected by then-director Lotte Lehmann. Because none of the students could cover the role of Zerbinetta, she was forced to hire famed soprano Marni Nixon.

Current voice program director Marilyn Horne chose the opera for this season's production partly to pay tribute to its role in the history of staged opera at the academy. This year, instead of resorting to an outside professional to play Zerbinetta, she had her pick of the 30 capable students who auditioned for the part.

In a nutshell, the opera tells the story of the complications surrounding a dinner party's musical entertainment. Two numbers are to be performed, the first a serious opera, the second a comedic play.

When it is decided that the two works must be performed simultaneously, the opera's composer becomes irate. Zerbinetta, the seductive star of the comedic play, subsequently convinces him to be grateful

that his music is being performed at all. The second half of the opera shows the actual performance of the combined works.

The entire production was well-paced and smooth; the succession of events seemed to flow naturally. Exchanges between characters were effective, especially those between the serious and comedic performers. Nothing was more enjoyable than watching Zerbinetta's clownish suitors poke fun at the overblown melancholy of Ariadne (played by Heidi Bieber.)

Performers in the first half were successful in simulating a chaotic and volatile backstage atmosphere. Bickering between characters, as between the Tenor and the Wigmaker, the Composer and the Footman, seemed remarkably realistic.

Mezzo-soprano Liesel Fedkenheuer was largely responsible for the success of the first half, for it was her emotional state as the agonized (male) composer that provided its dramatic weight. She did a fine job of establishing a sense of transition from anguish to acceptance over her opera's corruption. Her singing was phenomenal, with enough passion to make her character seem both idealistic and tragic.

The second half, complete with dinner tables, guests and candles, was also effective, though it somehow lacked the punch of the first. Both the singing and the staging of Ariadne and her entourage of nymphs effectively created a morose setting, which was in stark contrast to the jovial antics and costumes of Zerbinetta and her suitors.

Karen Wierzb's solo, as Zerbinetta, was the unquestionable highlight of the second half. Not only were her virtuosic figurations completely flawless, but they were filled with such personality that they seemed more whimsical than difficult. Her sound was beautiful, full of subtlety — which, along with her gestures and facial expressions, made Zerbinetta a captivating character.

Also notable was the rich, resonant voice of Shieh-Yin Lim in the role of Bacchus. His singing alone was an event in itself, perfect for the portrayal of a deity.

Behr and the Festival Opera Orchestra did a fine job throughout. Expressive passages in the Overture of the second half were especially memorable, as were the solos of cellist Emmanuelle Bergeron.

In general, however, the orchestra was a bit too loud for the singers. Many of the delicately sung passages in the second half were rendered completely inaudible.

Still, it was a remarkable performance, earning enthusiastic applause for singers and instrumentalists alike.

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