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Review

Cleveland Orchestra: Irving Berlin: From Rags to Ritzes at Blossom (August 14)

by Daniel Hathaway



It's probably all in a weekend's work, but you have to admire The Cleveland Orchestra for turning into a Russian orchestra under Jahja Ling on Saturday night for works by Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev and Rimsky-Korsakov, then magically transforming itself into a pops orchestra for an Irving Berlin retrospective under Jack Everly on Sunday night. But come to think of it, Berlin was Russian himself, and his amazing talent for crafting tunes with sophisticated harmonic implications that inspire symphonic orchestrations isn't really that different from that of Rachmaninoff.

Everly has assembled a winning show in Irving Berlin: From Rags to Ritzes, a production involving five vocalists and an extended symphonic ensemble. It's a creation of the Symphonic Pops Consortium, which is dedicated to the imagining and execution of such works, and its team of arrangers and orchestrators, including Everly himself, has done an excellent job of turning Berlin's music into a full evening of voluptuous

symphonic music.

Having The Cleveland Orchestra in the background added immeasurably to its musical success, though balances were sometimes strange because of mic placement within the ensemble. The Blossom Pavillion is a huge space and a lot of sound enhancement was in use on Sunday night. The three arrays of a dozen speakers each that dangled from the ceiling were a bit too close to our seats for comfort and made higher voices sound a bit strident. But the Orchestra seemed to be having a great time. Franklin Cohen's quasi-Klezmer riffs on the clarinet, Michael Sach's fiery jazz licks on the trumpet, Jeffrey Rathbun's limpid oboe solos, Peter Otto's poignant violin lines, and Robert Vernon's cameo viola solo came through vividly.

The evening began, of course, with an overture, a sequence of Irving Berlin tunes that led seamlessly from one to another, followed by what else but "There's No Business Like Show Business", where we were introduced to the individual personalities of the vocalists: Ashley Brown, Ted Keegan, Tony DeSare, Virginia Woodruff and James T. Lane. They're all quite different. Ms. Brown boasts a bright soprano voice, while Ms. Woodruff is a versatile but usually mellow mezzo. Ted Keegan is a Broadway tenor who tends to decorate his final notes with a fierce vibrato. James T. Lane, who often drew the comedy card, is easy to listen to and fun to watch. Tony DeSare is most at home singing at the piano keyboard, where his jazz background becomes obvious.

Mr. DeSare was wonderful both in his first act "Play a Simple Melody" and in his second act "I Love a Piano". Backed up subtly by Everly and the Orchestra, he was completely in his element, playing fluently and singing with an intimacy that drew the listener in. His infrequent and stylish use of vibrato was welcome.

Ms. Brown's "What'll I do" was similarly intimate. The "Steppin' Out Medley" that followed brought all five vocalists into a charming scene where dancing partners were swapped out and choreography took over.

Mr. Keegan followed with "Let's face the music and dance", then the other four joined in a sultry (and colorfully costumed) arrangement of "Heat Wave". The first half ended with the entire cast in "Strolling Up the Avenue", having changed costumes once again to black evening wear.

The torrential rains that began to fall just before curtain time agreeably subsided before intermission, after which we were jarred into other seasons of the year with a "Holiday Medley" Entr'acte including "White Christmas" and "Easter Parade". During the latter, Mr. Lane made a surprise entrance in a rabbit suit looking as though this were the stupidest thing he'd ever been asked to do before merrily hopping off stage.

A jazzy arrangement of "Alexander's Ragtime Band" brought all five vocalists back, then Mr. DeSare was left alone at the piano for "I Love a Piano" (what rhymes with Steinway? A lot of things!)

Ms. Brown and Ms. Woodruff ably joined in a "Sisters Medley" including "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody", "Sisters", "You'd Be Surprised", "Falling in love is wonderful" and "You're Just in Love", followed by a lovely, lush arrangement for the Orchestra of "Remember", a love song for Berlin's wife.

A soulful rendition of "How Deep Is the Ocean" by Ms. Woodruff and an energetic version of "Blue Skies" by Mr. Keegan set up the final medley of the evening: "Irving Berlin's America". Following Jack Everly's interesting account of Berlin's contributions to war effort for both World Wars, "This is a Great Country", "This is the Army", "Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning", "Give Me Your Tired" and "God Bless America" brought the evening to a rousing conclusion, followed by encores of "No Business Like Show Business" and "Alexander's Ragtime Band".

"From Rags to Ritzes" was a thoroughly enjoyable evening that reminded its audience of how much Irving Berlin single-handedly contributed to that virtual hall of fame called "The Great American Song Book".

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