MIT Symphony season begins

A friend suggested that I begin this review of the MIT Symphony Orchestra's opening concert of the season (given last Saturday, October 25, at 8:30 pm in Kresge) by stating that I had arrived in time for the second half. Though this would be a charitable way of avoiding comment on the problem of the first part of the program, I am honor bound to report that I was indeed in attendance for the entire evening.

It must be admitted that the program, consisting of Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy, the Third Violin Concerto of Mozart, the Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis by Vaughan Williams, and a suite from Walter Piston's ballet The Incredible Flutist, would prove daunting to all but the most polished and professional of orchestras, but David Epstein and the MIT Symphony have established a reputation for miracles in recent seasons. Indeed, most of the trouble was not there at all.

The Tchaikovsky began unsteadily, with quasi-woodwind intonation, and built to climaxes that were thoroughly quarreled by insipid cymbal playing—why couldn't we have a real solid crash?

The spirit of the late George Szell, conductor David Epstein's mentor, was strongly in evidence as the orchestra took its first bow. Such treatment as this first played to the clarity and dynamics treated by that notable Mozarteusser. But with the entrance of adagio Sandor Vegh, one could sense a sudden change in the atmosphere of the symphony's nineteenth-century playing of Mr. Vegh, contrasted with the suavely phrased of the orchestra. Such a mixture of approaches takes more than the two rehearsals audible to the orchestra-soloist combination on this occasion, and the lack of unity was painfully apparent.

Even more apparent, and even more painful, was a wide discrepancy of pitch that made the whole concerto a teeth-clenched listening experience. The orchestral intonation, Mr. Vegh came on stage with his instrument tuned far from the orchestra's standard, and his hasty retuning at the start did not rectify things. In addition, his pitch was not secure even within his own framework, though the jarring clash with the orchestra may have distorted his pitch sense. Mr. Epstein would be well advised to choose solists more carefully for compatibility with his own temperament, or else to insist on sufficient rehearsal time to iron out the differences. Sandor Vegh's Mozart might well be a more enjoyable, or at least interesting, experience in a more compatible framework.

After intermission, things went much more smoothly. The lush sonority of the Tallis Fantasia were treated to some of the best string playing I have ever heard from this orchestra, in a performance that was in all ways comparable to the magnificent one given by the Boston Symphony under Ernest Mitchell's direction this past summer at Tanglewood. The MIT Symphony is recording the Piston Incredible Flutist suite (though exact plans are being kept under wraps), and the extra work that always goes into a recording project was in evidence on this occasion, with fine playing from all sections of the orchestra and an appropriately jazzy spirit. The packed house demanded, and received, an encore of the last movement of the suite, and no doubt will await the record anxiously.

— Stephen H. Owades

Pacino in Dog Day Afternoon

The Sack Cinema people are really mining a bet on this one.

In Dog Day Afternoon they've got a first-class piece of film, an excellent story beautifully performed. But they insist on promoting it as if it were a wildly humorous tale of a semi-historical, badly bungled bank robbery. Such advertising is an insult to the film. While Sack's ad people haven't stinted in promoting the film—advance ads were running all over town a week before it opened—they're using a campaign that treats Al Pacino's delicate performance in the role of a desperate, his control, his timing, and his ability to portray a complex character, yielding much understanding of his homosexuality without a trace of embarrassment. It's as if they're afraid he'll turn out to be a loser who's about to lose again as if it were a farce. "The bank robbery was supposed to last ten minutes. Twelve hours later, it was the hottest thing on live TV. What?" reads one of their many basic ads. Such treatment that film doesn't deserve.

If you can get over the idea that you're about to see some sort of slapstick, Dog Day Afternoon is great.

The story line is adapted from an actual New York City bank robbery that failed a few years ago, but it no more needs that to recommend it than West Side Story needs its plot tied with Romeo and Juliet to make it a hit. And while there are some humorous moments—most of them mixed with pain—the film's best parts are those which focus on Pacino as he wrestles with the desperate situation that he's gotten himself into.

Pacino has grown up a lot since the Godfather. His control, his timing, and his ability to portray a complex character, giving an excellent performance as the describes his breakdown over and love for Pacino—a love which of the audience was distinctly uncomfortable.

The film has its flaws and weak points. Too much is made of Pacino's homosexual relationship without yielding much understanding of his character. And one entire plot sequence, in which Pacino is apparently tempted to sell out his partner in return for a better deal for himself, is left incomplete and underdone, to the detriment of the story, I feel.

But overall, Dog Day Afternoon is excellent, suspenseful, powerful, well-done, and nothing. And Pacino is great. I feel that if we were to promote it properly . . . .

— Michael D. McNamee

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