BSO opens season with Bach, Brahms

By Joel Weit

The Boston Symphony Orchestra is one of the world's finest orchestras, arguably the best on this continent. In the opening concerts of their 93rd season, performed last weekend at Symphony Hall, the BSO lived up to its reputation.

The program was typical of the fare offered during the symphony's 22-week winter season; one light opening piece, one post-World War II composition, and one romantic warhorse from the concert literature. In this case, the pieces were J.S. Bach's Symphony in E for double orchestra, A Symphony of Three Orchestras by Elliott Carter, and Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 2, featuring pianist Peter Serkin.

The Bach was written in the 1700's while J.S. Bach's eldest son was in London. This work is that of a mature J.C. Bach, contemporaneous with some of Mozart's earliest work. It is scored for two string orchestras, the first accompanied by oboes, horns and bassoons, the second joined by two flutes. The work, as played by the BSO, rests on the strength of the strings. The BSO has an excellent string section, and this piece served as a showcase for their ability to play with unity and clarity.

The choice of the piece itself seems inappropriate; perhaps the management or conductor/music director Seiji Ozawa himself feels that he should conduct 17th and 18th century music to maintain his credentials in the musical world. However, the 60-odd string players totally overwhelmed the 2 flutes, 2 oboes and harpsichord during the tutti passages, allowing the winds to be heard distinctly only when the strings exhibited great self-restraint during a few wind solos. And there is no way that the 17 Violin I's could simultaneously execute a trill with the precision of 8 or 10 equally talented violinists.

Elliot Carter (1908-), a student of Walter Piston and Nadia Boulanger, has to rank as one of this country's best-known living composers. Best known for his String Quartet No. 1, Carter was one of six composers commissioned in 1976 by the National Endowment for the Arts to write works for the New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Chicago, and Los Angeles orchestras. Like most modern 20th-century composers, Carter makes liberal use of percussion — vibraphone, chimes, marimba, xylophone, harp, glockenspiel, triangle and gong are but a few of the various instruments played by the three percussionists.

The performance of such a contemporary work must be criticized side-by-side with the work itself. Beginning with the theme of the high violin, Carter shows himself a master of orchestral texture and color. However, in terms of structure and form, Carter's piece left the audience desiring something more easily comprehended; the brilliance during the piece was followed by polite applause. Emanuel Brooker, the assistant concertmaster, was given the opportunity to display his first talents during several solo passages written for the principal violinist of Orchestras II. And, as usual, Seiji Ozawa showed himself to be one of the most capable conductors of modern music.

In the Brahms, the string section again played with remarkable clarity for their size. Ozawa and the BSO do an excellent job with Brahms' symphonic works. It demonstrated last year with Symphony No. 3 and last weekend with Piano Concerto No. 2, it is easy to see that Deutsches Grammophon will have them record the symphony cycle after the BSO's performance of the 4th this year.

Peter Serkin, the 31-year-old son of Rudolph Serkin, has received frequent critical acclaim since his debut 19 years ago at the Marlborough Music Festival. His tender and sensitive performance of the Brahms was excellent at times, notably at the opening of the fourth movement. However, his interpretation of the work seemed at odds with Ozawa and the orchestra during most of the work. Serkin's power and presence necessary for the soloist to maintain equal footing with such awesome forces.

The BSO continues its season this afternoon and tomorrow evening with the First Requiem and Messiah's Trusts Tiergarten.

Girl Friends: A compelling study

Girl Friends, a Warner Bros. release starring Melanie Mayron, Anita Skinner, Eli Wallach, and Christopher Guest, produced and directed by Claudia Weill, now playing at the Bach PI Alley theatres - rated PG.

By Al Sanders

When a young person is suddenly confronted with the situation of having to face the world alone for the first time, it is a frightening experience. Several films have explored this topic, usually involving young men fresh out of college, as in The Graduate.

It was movies such as these that gave Claudia Weill the inspiration for Girl Friends. Already acclaimed as a producer of documentaries, she originally set out to film a 30-minute short subject. As she described it, the idea was to make "sort of a female equivalent to The Graduate.

However, after fourteen months of frantic shooting schedules and the continual trauma of trying to raise money, the project evolved into a full-length feature. Through even more determination, she was able to get a major distributor, Warner Brothers, to pick it up.

With these auspicious beginnings, Girl Friends must have something going for it to achieve major release status. It does, namely a very creative filmmaker in Ms. Weill and some memorable performances by some less than well-known actors.

Despite the dominance of women in the film, on both sides of the camera, the film should not be thought of strictly as a "woman's film." This was not the producer's intent. Girl Friends portrays situations that both sexes can relate to.

The story revolves around Susan Weinblatt (Melanie Mayron), a struggling photographer who is forced to live alone for the first time in her life when her roommate, Anne (Anita Skinner) decides to get married. Although outwardly happy for Anne, Susan somewhat selfishly feels neglected by her.

Such feelings place a strain on their relationship, creating a deeper and deeper rift between them. Susan comes to admire the security of Anne's married life while Anne similarly envies Susan's newfound independence.

Through a climactic confrontation these inner thoughts come out into the open.

Only then are Susan and Anne able to become true friends, even more so than at the film's beginning.

Accompanying Susan's growth in maturity is a growth in personal confidence achieved via an equally rocky road. This road takes her from photographing bar mitzvahs and weddings up to her first display of work at a gallery.

Along the way, Susan gets involved with several interesting characters. Among them are the film's faltering romantic lead, who proves to be anything but a bedrock of emotional security, Amy Wright, portraying a spindly, middle-aged hitchhiker who becomes Susan's temporary roommate, and Christopher Guest as a boyfriend of Susan's whose sense of humor helps make up for his self-centered tendencies.

Girl Friends gets off to a rather disjointed start. We see bits and pieces of Susan and Anne's life together that create a mood more than a story. Once the film settles down, it acquires a continuity that is remarkable considering how often filming was forced to stop due to lack of money.

If one must look for faults, any flaws in the movie would probably be found to stem more from its low budget, than from any poor judgment on the filmmaker's part. However, the lack of money was not always a disadvantage. Often Weill was forced to reach way down into her bag of creative tricks coming up with scenes having much more impact than more straightforward (and more expensive) ones we have had.

Elements such as Melanie Mayron's compelling performance in a demanding role and the emotional, class-knit screenplay more than make up for the lack of visual extravaganzas that moviegoers have become so used to these days. With the countless numbers of multi-million dollar turkeys of the past few years, it is refreshing to find a low-budget gem.