Wellesley production of Jane Austen mildly successful

Pride and Prejudice, Wellesley College Theatre, Nov. 16-18.

The Wellesley presentation of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice this past week-end was much like a hometown high school spring production. The performance harbored a number of minor weaknesses but plot, humor and climate eventually combined for a happy conclusion.

The first act, though, started off slowly. The Bennets, a 19th century family caught up in the pressures of climbing the social ladder were presented through a set of notes out scenes lacking the cohesiveness necessary to provide for a fluid development of plot. Some actors were unable to consistently project their lines (particularly Wellesleyan Alexandra Lipunov, who played Mrs. Bennett), and stage movement was limited. Neither of these problems was alleviated by the poor acoustics of Alumnae Hall or the uninclined rows of seats, which made unobstructed vision impossible for any but the first-row.

Another deficiency stemmed from the immobility of perch of the characters. The weight of Jane Austen's original plot came across with a clarity which, when combined with the uncontrolled exuberance of the actors related to their parts extremely well. Towards this end, James Butterfield (portraying the proud Mr. Darcy) and freshwater Catherine Merrill (as the prejudiced Lizzy Bennet) succeeded in the leading roles. But the highlight of the show was the deformation of a less-peaked but concerned father, Mr. Bennett, by MIT's Robert Mahalchik. His ironic quips about the faults of his good-willed wife at the expense of his simple-minded wife were perfectly played out.

In the end, Austen's primary message that you can't judge a book by its cover clearly emerges. The most truly sincere and loving of youthful couples are united, and the superficial and eager-to-succeed get what they deserve — each other. And all in all, the performance received what was deserved — three mildly summoned curtain calls from the appreciative audience.

Scott Leckman

Eighteenth Century comes to life

Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, conducted by Frans Brüggen; Boston Opera House, Nov. 17.

The debate goes on between those who prefer the technical advances of modern instruments and those who claim that concerts ought to be performed on the same instruments the music's composers would have heard them on. And if a case is to be made for the latter approach, then it is for the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century to make it. The Orchestra consists of 46 musicians from around the world, including Boston's well-known baroque violinist Daniel Stepen and violinist Laura Farnense; all play on authentic instruments. Perhaps most remarkable in their Boston concert was the immiscible sense of balance the ensemble attained: Gluck's Ballet Suite from Don Juan took on a clarity which, together with a surefire charm and grace, made a compelling argument for this rarefied performance of music; Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 24, performed by John Gibbons on fortepiano, was the most con- trived item on the program. Anyone who has heard Vladimir Ashkenazy's recording of this work knows that there is a seemingly unbeatable case for the modern pianist: Ashkenazy plays this piece with such deep inward reflection that it would hardly seem possible to get closer to the heart of Mozart. And, indeed, the sound of Gibbons' fortepiano was finer and more emotionally expressive than is possible on a modern instrument. His performance, though, had a natural simplicity that, when combined with the uncompli- cated style of strings capable of reaching an almost indescribable softness and that of both precision and warmth, created a profundity of itself. The second movement, in particular, possessed a spirituality that was quintessentially Mozartian.

Beethoven's Symphony No. 1, which concluded the concert, benefited from the rare combination of a group of musicians who could both play together in perfect cohesion and display their individuality in a performance in which one could clearly hear each voice of the orchestra. The first movement was perhaps a little too me- chanical in places, the second movement did have patches of blandness, but the textures combined and re-combined in brilli- ant aesthetic throughout, and the dance-like qualities of the fourth movement brought the concert to a conclusion of lightness and life.

Jonathan Richmond

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