THE ARTS

MIT Symphony plays Mozart's drama with wit

MIT SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Conducted by David Epstein.

Eras Egoy, violin solo.
Works by Mozart, Nielsen, and Dvorák.

By Thomas Chen

MIT's Symphony Orchestra sprang into last action last Saturday with the Overture to Mozart's The Impresario. The violin tone was at times edgy and uneven and the overall violin sound seemed too big for Mozart's music. But, such lapses into harshness apart, Mozart's drama-in-music was wittily communicated by David Epstein and his musicians.

Carl Nielsen (1865-1931) was a resourceful and original composer, but an inadequately recognized one. Nielsen ingeniously incorporated the folk music of his homeland, Denmark, into his compositions using 20th-century poly-tonality, typically exemplified in his Clarinet Concerto. After the initiative carry on a folk-slah tune, the clarinet seems to mate at the song-like passing melodies. integrating them with fast-fingered passagework.

Jenellie Jenelli Eras Egoy did not seem to have any difficulties with Nielsen's demanding score, producing a very round and forceful tone when required — it was always beautiful. His glorious tone was wonderfully displayed in the very soulful middle section of the piece. Although Egoy did not play from memory, his versatility as a musician gave many of the faster passages an improvisatory character and made the concerto a delight to hear.

Dvorák was also one to draw on his national heritage in his work. Throughout his Eighth Symphony, Dvorák brilliantly switcht—s moods from measure to measure, heightening the drama of the music. Epstein certainly had this in mind as he directed a very passionate performance. Fine though Epstein's musical interpretation might have been, however, I again found the violin tone deficient. The violinists were unable to produce the reliable, homogeneous sound demanded for Dvorák's off-lush orchestration. On the whole, the sound was fierce, and when it was not fierce, it was just out-of-tune. It would help if the violinists would follow the bowings of their concertmaster, George Ogata.

Although the violas and cellos fared better than the violins, the winds consistently showed more poise. Except for a few (but understandable) wobbles from the horns, the winds played more like a chamber ensemble with a singular musical purpose. They were most effective in the slow movement of Violas-fiddles apart, the orchestra can be praised for their communication of passion in the music, bringing the concert to an emotional conclusion.

The overall effect of this section was rather muted and understated, but was completely changed by the simultaneous entrance of orchestra jazz. The horn entrance was subtle, with the three trumpets (muted) playing against Philip Scarff's soprano saxophone. The trombones and bass players followed the lead of the trumpet and saxophone. The first half consisted of pieces from the CD. The second half featured the premier of Harvey's ambitious large work "Passages/Psalms II," inspired by contemporary social justice issues.

The piece opened with some hand drumming (on a conventional drum kit) by Harry Wollett. This drumming was joined by hand clapping, and "hand drumming" by John Funkhouser on the trombone. Richard Nelson added the first melodic strain to the piece with random jazz guitar licks. To add to the mood-setting effect, various horn players embellished the sound with whistles, key slaps, and other rhythmic sounds. To complete the introduction, Funkhouser bowed his bass in a duet with the guitar, producing a haunting groove effect and setting the stage for the entrance of the horns.

The trombone entrance was sublime, with the three trombones (muted) playing against Philip Scarff's soprano saxophone. The trombones and bass players played a counterpoint to the theme played by the trumpet. Scarff then played a soprano sax solo over the horns, in a somewhat understated fashion.

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Aardvark exploits tonal options of orchestra jazz

AARDVARK JAZZ ORCHESTRA
First Congregational Church Cambridge. Oct. 23.

By Dave Fox

There's Aardvark Jazz Orchestra, led by trumpeter and MIT Lecturer Mark Harvey, is one of the most interesting groups on the Boston music scene. As befits the "orchestra" moniker, Aardvark is composed of no less than nineteen musicians (including Harvey), who play virtually all instruments ever associated with jazz music.

This gives Harvey a composer immense flexibility in tonal options, which he exploits as fully as any big band composer ever has. Instead of the usual grouping of five saxophones, four trombones, five trumpets, and a conventional rhythm section, Harvey has replaced the piano and several brass chairs with electric bass, French horn, and a dedicated hand drummer to produce a very exciting instrumental combination. Coupled with Harvey's formidable compositional skills, this makes for very exciting new music.

Saturday's concert was a CD release performance celebrating the release of Aardvark's first CD, Aardvark Steps Out (soon to be reviewed in this space). The concert was in two halves, with a short intermission. The first half consisted of pieces from the CD.

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