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LSO's 'Organ Symphony' features stellar performances

By DICK JAEGER *Special to The Journal & Courier*

Although it wasn't the final concert of the season, the conductor of the Lafayette Symphony Orchestra declared to the audience that the final May concert was to be lighter in nature than the usual classical programming. So the audience was set to enjoy this concert for it contained some fine music and featured one of Greater Lafayette's favorite solo performers, Marc Loudon.

It is gratifying to perceive the musical atmosphere and proficiency of this 2007-2008 season's concerts that will close with the May concert. **We have heard more challenging programming, a higher level of performance quality and a generally good rapport with the musicians and the audience, all due, no doubt, to the first-rate leadership of Maestro Nicholas Palmer. His down-to-earth communication with local supporters is apparent in audience acceptance and next season promises to be equally exhilarating.**

The concert was titled the "Organ Symphony" concert but it contained a great deal more. It makes one wonder where Palmer located all those brass players. Those titanium-lipped, leather lunged players were given several chances to shine on Saturday evening and shine they did. LSO has not had a brass section with this facility and "chutzpah" in my memory which goes back quite a few years. My question to the Maestro is, "Do you make them play or do you let them play like that?" He just smiles and says, "Yep. They are pretty good, aren't they?" That is putting it mildly.

The concert opener was the "Overture to Luisa Miller" a Verdi opera that is often passed over by opera impresarios for some unknown reason. The overture can stand alone as a separate orchestral piece with some of the Italian's Verdi's best orchestration. Perhaps the gloomy plot edges out the beauty of the music but the LSO did great service to a work that is often ignored or overlooked.

Following was Maurice Ravel's orchestration of the original piano group "Pictures at an Exhibition" by Modest Mussorgsky. A descriptive work of several "movements" connected by short sections called "Promenades," it is richly descriptive as a visit to a mythical art exhibition and is inherently Russian in style although given a French touch by Ravel's orchestral transcription. The final section, "The Great Gate of Kiev" is stunning in its majesty and while I do not ignore the contributions of the strings, woodwinds and percussion, those fine brasses outdid themselves in this one.

Camille Saint-Saens was one of those French "wunderkinds" of music in the manner of the German Mozart and Mendelssohn. Writing his first composition for piano at age 3, he had memorized all 32 piano sonatas of Beethoven by the age of 10 and challenged his audiences to pick one as an encore which he would play from memory.

"Symphony No. 3 in C minor" is known as the "Organ Symphony" because of the unusual use of that instrument as another orchestral instrument.

The guest soloist of the work was Loudon. Loudon has probably taken more well-deserved solo bows in this area than any other musician. His fame reached beyond Indiana's borders and he is known as a pianist, a harpsichordist, an organist; he is a fine vocal coach as well as a tough competitor on the tennis court. This in no way hampers his day job as a faculty member at Purdue University. No wonder he deserves those bows.

The "Symphony No. 3" perhaps does not give the organist a chance to display talents to the fullest but with the exception of some major triple forte chords that caused the audience to jump a bit, it was a stellar performance on everybody's part. The opening movements starts quietly but quickly gives way to some nervous, restless string work. Going from there to develop the many themes that the composer piles one on another it became a bit of a search to see just when he would develop the motifs fully or whether he merely adds new material.

Saint-Saens actually preferred to write operas (13, in fact) but only one has remained in the upper echelon of national opera companies' favorites: "Samson and Delilah." While this symphony is numbered three, the fact is that it was number five and he never wrote another. He was convinced that the symphony was a "German" invention and he was "too French" to continue writing in that medium.

Needless to say we are happy that he wrote this one and especially that the LSO played it so beautifully. Players, soloist and conductor all coalesced into an exquisite accomplishment that left the audience with the realization that the evening was well spent and pleased that they had braved the rain and enhanced their day.

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