



Astoria Music Festival sparkles; audience raises the roof of Liberty Theatre

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What was Peer Gynt thinking?

Everyone knows you must *never* upset a Norwegian.

Well, his goose was well and truly cooked, wasn't it?

After cutting a swath through the village ladies, sowing his wild oats across North Africa and the Middle East, then returning home, he can't have expected a warm welcome.

He didn't get it.

"Slagt ham! Slagt ham!"

"Slay him!" roared the villagers. "Slay him!"

The drama was played out in Astoria's Liberty Theater Saturday evening as the Astoria Music Festival entered its second night.

It followed a triumphant sold-out opening night of Broadway tunes that delighted Friday's standing audience so intensely that their applause threatened to lift off the roof.

Edvard Grieg's music for "Peer Gynt" was written to accompany a dramatic poem by fellow Scandinavian author Henrik Ibsen. "In the Hall of the Mountain King" is instantly hummable, and appears on just about every "best-of-classics" CD, and if there is room for two, the next choice is "Prelude: Morning Mood."

Under conductor Keith Clark, both pieces were given fresh and dynamic approaches. Clark was especially good at controlling the pace for the best-known movement. It was like a steam train from a standing start, fueling its boilers with a soft bassoon, then cellos plucking their strings, then firing up the violins to do the same, then everyone taking their bows and sawing for all they were worth.

The success of the production was a true team effort. David Ogden Stiers ("M*A*S*H," "Doc Hollywood") provided the narration. His voice is sharp and precise - he's like an erudite cheeky child who pronounces his consonants. His timing, interspersing comments and avoiding talking during the louder parts of the score, reflected his own musical skill. As well as acting, he has a parallel career as a conductor and often leads the Newport Symphony Orchestra.

Amy Hansen, who is a Festival stalwart, played the jilted Solveig. Although she sang in Norwegian, her character's disappointment was clear. While many focus on Hansen's exceptionally pleasing soprano voice, her acting skills may be overlooked. Not so here. In

a confined space, she added to the emotion of the moment.

Also performing on the small apron stage were the Maddox Dance Studio Little Ballet Theatre Dancers. With cleverly crafted costumes and fluent movements the dancers added color and impact to the evening, interacting with the expressive Stiers (as Peer) with spontaneous humor.

The authentically-costumed Ultima Thule Choir under director Ivar Solberg from Tromsø, Norway, and the North Coast Chorale, under charming local talent Denise Reed-Hinds, blended beautifully. Ruth Dobson, who coordinated the festival with Clark, had prepared her Festival Apprentice Vocal Artists well.

Together they built a mountain of sound: The returning Peer Gynt got an earful, and so did we.

As if that wasn't enough, the audience was treated to Elizabeth Pitcairn as soloist in the D minor Violin Concerto by Sibelius. To say Pitcairn is talented is like saying Cadbury's chocolate tastes OK. She is exceptional. But she brings an added dimension to the party - a 1721 Stradivarius. This remarkable instrument, reportedly bought for her by her grandfather for \$1.6 million, combined with her talent, is a treat to the ears. At one point, one of the younger members of the Festival Orchestra strings section gaped open-mouthed as Pitcairn performed her magic. Audience members were similarly stricken.

Pitcairn entered with a statuesque dignity, then, with her first few bars, exploded into action like a champion athlete. At one point, as she arched her back to coax the notes out of the instrument, I would have sworn the violin neck was plumb vertical. Her bow moved faster than the eye could see, but it was her left hand, fluttering like a trapped butterfly, that provided the nuances that set great string players apart.

To get the balance right, Clark demanded solid work from the bassoons, clarinets and cellos. They didn't disappoint. Sibelius' music evokes a sense of place. It is moody, for sure, but the overall effect was satisfying and entertaining.

Friday's concert was under the direction of Norman Leyden, who has been directing for seven decades. As well as steering the Astoria Festival Orchestra through some delights, he took a moment to play the clarinet, delightfully well.

Vocal star of the show was Richard Zeller, whose "Old Man River" from "Showboat" offered a booming dignity. It was the pacing that gave the familiar piece an astonishing poignancy.

He also did the impossible. When Freddy Eynsford-Hill pines outside Eliza Doolittle's house in "My Fair Lady," I'm willing to bet there's usually not a single audience member who wants this simpering wimp to get the girl.

After Zeller's rendition of "On the Street Where She Lives," I bet there are legions willing to suggest that Henry Higgins should remain a bachelor forever. Zeller gave the song - the worst moment in a great Lerner and Loewe show - a surprising and powerful approach that made his Freddy likeable and worthy of Eliza's attentions.

Katie Harman added her style of sparkle to Friday night. The girl who helped lead the nation's spiritual recovery as Miss America in the year after 9/11 has blossomed into a mature audience-pleaser. And here she was, playfully bantering with Leyden and belting out the hits with verve, lyrics as corny as Kansas in August, of course, but superb entertainment to start the festival.

Concluding the first act - no one in their right mind would try to follow it right away - was Pink Martini's Thomas Lauderdale performing "Rhapsody in Blue." His piano style was aggressive, and at times amusing, as he gave new vigor to Gershwin's masterpiece.

Under Leyden, the Astoria Festival Orchestra rose to the bait, and as Lauderdale alternated between caressing and walloping the keys, they followed suit. Marc Dubac's clarinet work was especially memorable, and the flutes shone, but it was Lauderdale's command, and especially his exploitation of the pauses, that brought a fresh interpretation to an American classic.

The intermission was a necessary break for the goosebumps to subside.

Concerts continue midweek at Clatsop Community College's Performing Arts Center, followed by more classical music next weekend, the opera "Wozzeck" Friday and Saturday nights, and a grand finale 4 p.m. Sunday. Sandwiched in the schedule is a 4 p.m. Saturday concert with cellist Sergey Antonov, who was a hit making his debut at last year's Astoria Music Festival.

On the basis of these first two performances, it is clear that the eighth annual Astoria Music Festival is going to be memorable.

And if this sort of raucous audience behavior continues, hard-working Liberty Theater manager Rosemary Baker Monaghan may have to recruit folks with hammers to nail the roof back on.