

Going with the musical flow

March 13, 2009

Cellist Elinor Frey was in town last week to perform with the Rogue Valley Symphony Orchestra. I caught the last of her three performances, which was held in the Music Recital Hall of Southern Oregon University.

This turned out to be RVSO conductor Arthur Shaw's last concert in the Ashland venue. His final concert with the symphony will be April 25 and 26 when the season closes. The symphony will perform "Carmina Burana" with the Rogue Valley Chorale and both performances will take place at the Craterian Ginger Rogers Theater in Medford.

This may have been the reason for Shaw's comments from the conductor's podium. He noted the fine acoustics of the recital hall and what a treasure it is for the community.

He then gave a very lively description of "The Moldau," Bedrich Smetana's tone painting about one of Bohemia's great rivers — from its forest springs beginnings, growing into a mighty stream, coursing through woods, valleys, rapids and the Bohemian countryside before peacefully drifting out of sight on its way to join the Elbe River.

Shaw's depiction guided our imaginations through what we would be hearing in the 12-minute piece as if we were on a leaf floating down the river, carried by the current and Smetana's melodies.

"The Moldau" was one of three selections on the program that had been chosen by previous RVSO audiences. The other two pieces, Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony and Bizet's L'Arlésienne Suite No. 2, were crowd pleasers — as was to be expected.

The audience also came to hear Frey perform Elgar's Concerto for Cello and Orchestra, E minor, op. 85. And they were equally pleased.

Frey played again only a few days later. This time she performed in a program with the Second Street Musicians, a community ensemble of dedicated, amateur string players who come together weekly during an eight-month season to make music together under the direction of professional musicians.

The group was started by Ashland music teacher Patricia Potter. When Potter left Southern Oregon for Arizona, the group came under the direction of Scott Cole, conductor, and Lisa Truelove, chamber coach. Cole is first violin and concertmaster for the Rogue Valley Symphony Orchestra, and Truelove plays cello with the symphony.

Some of the members of the Second Street Musicians had played an instrument early on in life and then stopped for one reason or another, usually to raise a family or establish a career. Inspired by the Second Street Musicians, they have picked up their instruments again later in life.

Others had always wanted to play and were just getting around to it. Either way, the group makes it possible to learn and perform together.

"We are passionate," said Second Street Musicians coordinator Margaret Scarborough. "We don't want to leave it to the professionals or our grandchildren. We want to make music ourselves."

Frey is friends with one of the members of the Second Street Musicians and agreed to perform with them at their spring concert.

At the Rogue Valley Symphony performance I sat in the back row of the packed recital hall. At the Second Street Musicians concert in the First United Methodist Church of Ashland, I sat in the front row next to two string players from the Rogue Valley Symphony Orchestra.

The first two pieces — Schubert and Mozart — were performed by the 12 chamber players of the ensemble. Truelove sat directly in front of the musicians, with her back to the audience, playing the cello and conducting with her eyes and motions from her head.

When the chamber players had finished the Mozart piece and stood to take their bows, I saw Frey, who also was sitting in the front row, silently mouth the words "Nice. Good job" to her friend in the group, accompanied by a warm smile.

The full orchestra was up next. Cole stood in front in the traditional place occupied by the conductor and led with his arms and the baton in the way of all conductors. The orchestra played three works — by Respighi, Washburn and Mussorgsky — before Frey joined them for Vivaldi's Concerto in B minor for cello and strings.

Frey walked up to the edge of the stage and explained to the audience some finer points about Baroque music. She then sat down right in front of me and played. I could see her face and how it changed with the music. There were moments of seriousness when her eyes were closed, and then a smile would blossom on her face and she would look over at Cole and the harpsichord player, Joseph Yungen.

After she took her bows, Frey dashed off stage, out the side door then back on stage where she stood behind the orchestra for the final selection of the evening. This time she played the triangle.

When the 22 musicians stood for their hard-won applause, they were beaming. So were we all.

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