

Sins, Swans, and Dons in Santa Rosa

REVIEW: SANTA ROSA SYMPHONY

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Patrons returning for the second half of Monday night's Santa Rosa Symphony concert witnessed the unusual sight of five microphones: one to the left of the conductor's podium, next to a black stool, and four to the right, with accompanying chairs. The stool and chairs were soon occupied, respectively, by vocal soloist Ute Lemper and the male vocal ensemble Hudson Shad.

These peculiar forces and accoutrements had been assembled by Music Director Bruno Ferrandis for Kurt Weill's *Seven Deadly Sins*, a rarely performed work from 1933, originally written as a ballet with accompanying lyrics by Bertolt Brecht. In the original version, a soprano sings the role of Anna I, one side of a split personality, and a ballerina dances the role of her counterpart, Anna II, with occasional brief vocal interjections.

Instead of adopting the ballet format, the powers that be chose to combine Annas I and II into a single person (Lemper), even though the stage had plenty of room for a dancer. While Lemper mostly sang, she did make a few faintly balletic moves by twirling her floor-length black dress or swaying suggestively.

The awkward format was but one of many problems with the performance. The libretto stuffed into the programs, for example, was only in English, even though Lemper was singing the original German. The absence of a parallel text made following along difficult.

Equally puzzling was the lack of supertitles. In this day and age, supertitles are a given for opera, and there's a compelling case for bringing them into symphonic vocal performances, as well. Their presence would reduce the rustling of librettos, if nothing else.

The microphones were yet another problem. Classical soloists generally avoid these contraptions because they fundamentally alter the quality of sound produced. Instead of a voice ringing out from an actual person, you get a disembodied voice squawking out of a box. The first has a full sound, replete with subtlety; the latter is reduced to an electronic signal notably lacking in finesse.

The real problem with the performance, however, was Lemper herself. Her voice, amplified or not, ranges from a low-pitched growling sound to a high-pitched whine, with little in between except for a pervasive vibrato. To be fair, that may be the cabaret style of performance required for Weill, but it quickly grows old.

The vocal quartet was much better, and their long chorus representing the sin of gluttony was the highlight of the show. Ranged from left to right on the stage, they seemed almost a caricature of a male vocal quartet, beginning with a short, smooth-skinned, rotund tenor, moving up through a couple of baritones, and ending with a tall, thin, bearded bass. Their voices blended well, and their enactment of the lyrics was often hilarious.

In the background, Ferrandis and the Symphony did their best to make sense of Weill's music, which offers little variety. The score is mostly an extended recitative for Anna I, with little in the way of melodic invention or thematic contrast. One exception is the "Covetousness" section, where the violins offer an effective counterpoint to the quartet.

The audience, though, loved it, and Lemper performed two Weill encores. The obligatory *Mack the Knife* (sung in German) was followed by a French lullaby from 1935. In the latter, Lemper dropped her cabaret style and opted for more soothing tones, though it's hard to imagine a baby being lulled to sleep by a parent singing into a microphone.

And Now for Something Completely Traditional

The first half of the concert was far better for the purists in the hall. It began with a solid performance of Mozart's overture to *Don Giovanni*. Ferrandis used his fluid arm gestures to propel the orchestra forward, coaxing particularly good ensemble work from the strings. Sadly, the overture was over way too soon. Minus the subsequent opera, it's really quite short.

The opera, more or less, arrived in the form of the ballet suite from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. This similarly tragic romantic tale is suffused with familiar melodies, which the Symphony played to the hilt. Absent a corps de ballet, Ferrandis became the premier danseur, twirling about the podium like a virtual Nureyev.

The eight-part suite began with a haunting oboe solo from principal Barbara Midney in the first part, followed by a memorable waltz in the second. The person next to me began swaying in her seat during the waltz, perhaps responding to the urgency and elegance of the performance. A well-played cornet solo from principal trumpet Doug Morton led to the waltz's rousing conclusion, which was followed by sustained applause.

The subsequent parts of the suite never did quite rise to the energy level of the waltz, but that's the nature of Tchaikovsky's score, not a criticism of the performance. The Symphony played wonderfully all the way to the end. Of particular note were the harp (Randall Pratt), violin (Joe Edelberg), and cello (Wanda Warkentin) solos in the fourth part, and another Morton cornet solo in the seventh.

At the end of *Swan Lake*, the audience gave Ferrandis and company a well-deserved standing ovation, a gesture they repeated at the concert's conclusion. Both gestures marked a fitting end to another great season from this talented regional orchestra. The repertoire and soloists may have had their highs and lows, but the orchestra's performance was first-rate all season long.

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