

A TOUCHING TRIBUTE, A CENTURY LATER

Lemeland's Posthumous Music Enshrining Ties to Americans

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SANTA ROSA—An all-French symphony program produced a posthumous work reflecting the gratitude of a French composer for the GIs who freed him in World War Two.

The unusual world-premiere opus at the Santa Rosa Symphony was a deep-felt string-orchestra piece *Battle Pieces* by Aubert Lemeland, interspersed with the reading of the wartime poetry written by US soldiers. Lemeland, who was to have crossed the Atlantic to attend, passed away less than a month ago, just short of his 78th birthday.

Lemeland was an unusual and apparently self-taught composer with motivation greater than his musical sophistication; at least, his biography mentions nothing at all about his music education. In Normandy as a youth, he had met the liberation soldiers and, with his family, had to flee some of the heated battles in the 1944 invasion to free the land of Nazi domination. He had written an hour-long piano cycle to go with the poetry of those times. At the behest of Ferrandis, he was impelled to select five of the segments for orchestration to produce the premiere, scrapping the idea of a “French Festival Overture” initially announced.

The sections of the 19-minute opus were in a familiar style, not dissimilar to the British works of Holst, Delius and Britten nearly a century ago. Nos. 1 and 4 were laments in elegiac manner, while No. 3 was upbeat and sprightly, with the piano playing a guidance role. Some complexity entered the other pieces, particularly the gorgeous cello chorale with the cello section divided (which would make any composer proud), and the contrapuntal finale with its considerable variation in dynamics.

In between, soldiers’ poems were read (in English) by a local war veteran, Bernard Sugarman, recalling some of the classic verses by Wilfred Owen, a soldier victim of the previous world war.

There followed the Poulenc *Gloria* (1960) with massed choirs, a rather joyous piece providing a strong modern counterpart to the Vivaldi *Gloria*, with Cyndia Sieden as the soprano soloist. All the vocalists were hampered by the less-than-robust acoustics of the hall, where even with 120 singers on stage, they sounded remote.

French Music Director Bruno Ferrandis, an acquaintance of Lemeland’s, led the program which was clearly close to his heart, before a sizable matinee audience on Dec. 4 which included senior citizens rallying en masse to hear their city’s orchestra. Ferrandis has a spiky baton style not ideally suited to the flow of ardent lyrical music. Much to his credit however, almost every 2010-11 program contains a selection written around the mid-20th century or more recently.

The timing of this program was not ideal. Here in the season of Advent and the Nativity, where Christmas music has been blaring at us from all sides since November, death was the major theme of this concert concluding with the serene meditative message of Fauré’s *Requiem*.

Couldn’t Death be transferred to a different month? I fled into the night, with decidedly mixed feelings.

D. Rane Danubian has been covering the dance and modern-music scene in the San Francisco Bay Area with relish – and a certain amount of salsa – for years.

These critiques appearing weekly (or sometimes semi-weekly, but never weakly) will focus on dance and new musical creativity in performance, with forays into books (by authors of this region) theater and recordings by local artists as well.