


A happy convergence of Beethoven, blues and black holes

May 13, 2008 **BY BRYANT MANNING**

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The whole world's a stage and everybody playin' their part."

These words were sung Monday night by blues guitarist John Primer for Larry Hoffman's hybrid work "Three Songs for Bluesman and Orchestra." At that particular moment, someone could have surveyed the Orchestra Hall stage where the Chicago Sinfonietta sat and imagined that those lyrics had been written for them.

For the last concert of its 21st season, all the members of the diverse orchestra played their parts in a welcome space oddity that successfully brought together Beethoven, the blues and black holes.

In 2006, conductor and Sinfonietta founder Paul Freeman collaborated with the Adler Planetarium astronomer and visual artist Jose Francisco Salgado for a program featuring Holst's "The Planets." Monday night at Symphony Center, Freeman led a similar multimedia program, anchored by Modest Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition," as arranged by Ravel, against a backdrop of the artist's moving celestial images.

Salgado's astral collages included the rings of Saturn, the crevices of Mars and starry globular clusters. The nature of the images alternated between ersatz video-game graphics and breathtakingly real satellite shots; who could have imagined that Mussorgsky's famous 1874 suite would be so ideally suited for both of them?

Piano soloist Leon Bates' mastery of the Steinway in Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," for piano and orchestra, generated the evening's biggest thrills. Bates punched out the familiar melodies and variations with relish and pizzazz; when the lovely slow section arrived, the crowd hummed along with him. The orchestra sounded vivacious and radiant, as if it'd been waiting all night to play the masterpiece.

If the Gershwin work is a classical piece colored by blues and jazz, then the aforementioned Hoffman work is the reverse. Primer -- who was once the right-hand man of mannish boy Muddy Waters -- improvised on a twangy acoustic guitar while his backing orchestra morphed into his nightclub counterpart. When he broke into his slide guitar stylings, the effect was pure, achy-hearted bliss.

Beethoven's "Egmont Overture" might have benefitted from a little more testosterone, but the Sinfonietta's refined tone and clarity made up for it. You won't have to wait until next season to see the excellent ensemble again, since it will be at Millennium Park for another performance Aug. 22 of "The Planets."


Bryant Manning is a contributing editor for TimeOut Chicago.

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