

'Fidelio' falters then slowly dies

By Gene Barnes
special writer

The performances of the opera "Fidelio" at Ford Auditorium last weekend created two problems for me — how to be honest without being completely demoralizing, and where to begin.

Let's start with the matter of staging. The opera at Ford. This is the second attempt after last year's "Elektra." I think it's safe now to generalize. When the carefully designed shell is removed from the stage to accommodate the scenery, the hall's acoustics revert from merely mediocre to intolerable. If a character turns to address another, his voice is no longer audible to half the audience. And that's true even if the listener is seated in one of the first rows. It would be wiser to have a better concert performance and no staging.

There are at least two more reasons in favor of a concert performance. First, in "Fidelio" there was the ludicrous, melodramatic appearance and actions of the characters. Costume designer Tonina Dorati (the Maestro's

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daughter) and stage director Sarah Ventura must share the blame with Beethoven and his improbable plot.

The opera is set in 18th century Spain. Ms. Dorati saw fit to suit everyone up in the timeless peasant costumes of Switzerland, circa 1850. That was marginally acceptable — at least until the arrival of the bad guys.

Don Pizarro and his henchmen goestopped on stage dressed like precursors of Hitler's SS, and Wolfgang Lenz (Pizarro) was made up to look like a decadent Roman emperor out of Claudius. This kind of heavy-handed symbolism is an insult to the intelligence of the viewers.

ADD TO THIS Ms. Ventura's realization of the plot. She had the released prisoners looking like zombies from "Night of the Living Dead." In another incident, Pizarro handled his cape as if

he were about to shout, "Curses."

In such place, the audience laughed out loud in open derision. For all the opera's faults, Beethoven still could have been better served.

All of this leads to another significant reason for a concert version — cost. If Ford acoustics without the shell are so dismal and the staging visually ridiculous anyway, then why blow \$100,000 to do it? Isn't the orchestra broke enough?

The Detroit Symphony also appears to be a victim of an opera jinx. Last year's Elektra was sick and had to be replaced. Ditto this year's Duke Bluebeard during the Bartok Festival.

Now in "Fidelio," Lenz was obviously having problems fighting an illness. His super-macho character was thus weakened. Less obvious was Elizabeth Ader in the title role. I'm only guessing that she must have been sick, too, otherwise how could she be in such awful voice and still claim to be a professional opera singer?

THE REMAINDER of the cast was simply lackluster. A particular exception, however, was the dungeon aria of Hermann Winkler's Florstan. It was sufficiently moving to show just how fine the whole opera could have been had not all of the above militated against it so ruthlessly.

Maestro Antal Dorati and the orchestra were generally inspired, if not always technically perfect. Dorati succumbed to the contemporary nonsense of using one of Beethoven's discarded overtures, the so-called Leonore No. 3, as an interlude between scenes in the final act.

Not only is it simply too heavy for use there, it seriously impedes the forward movement of the action and repeats much of the musical material as well, constructing meaningless redundancy.

And in the case of this production of "Fidelio," it would have been much kinder to omit it and let everyone out a little earlier.

Beaux Arts trio plays many Beethoven gems

By Gene Barnes
special writer

Last weekend the Chamber Music Society of Detroit presented a kind of Beethoven minifestival. Celebrating their 25th year as an ensemble, the Beaux Arts Trio performed everything Beethoven ever wrote for piano trio.

Members of the trio are Menahem Pressler, piano, Isidore Cohen, violin, and Bernard Greenhouse, cello.

On each evening, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, a different program was offered, and for balance, each program had some early Beethoven and some late. An evening would begin, for instance, with a trio from Beethoven's Opus 1, and end with a later trio from Opus 70 or 97.

Happily, far from devoting all its attention to the later works, the Beaux Arts Trio seemed to have spent most of its time working on the earlier works for the scintillating performances it gave of them.

Beethoven's Opus 1 Trios aren't the first things he ever wrote, but they are the first things he published. So naturally the composer probably lavished a great deal of attention on them. They are real gems, filled with dashing prestos and heart-breaking lovely slow movements, and they became the cornerstone for each concert.

The Beaux Arts took the prestos at a breathlessly fast pace, but the renditions of the slow movements were the heavens. How beautifully they played (as the name implies), and with what subtle restraint.

THE MORE mature, more complex later trios were rather hard to reconcile with these earlier works. It was almost as if they came from a different composer, instead of just an older wiser Beethoven. With perhaps the exception of the final "Archduke" Trio, Opus 97, the later works were performed with less melodrama by the Beaux Arts, as would be suitable for their heavier intellectual content.

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The "Archduke," though, being uncharacteristically direct, demanded, and received, more introspection and more drama in order to get right to the heart of it.

The evening also provided an unusually lengthy opportunity to witness how the trio, commonly regarded as the world's greatest, works together so successfully.

Pressler is a volatile pianist who hunches over his keyboard and shoots anxious glances at the violinist, Cohen. Celloist Greenhouse sits as if were in the corner and feels his way along with the minimum of eye contact. Cohen and Greenhouse are like straight men to Pressler's extroversion.

PRESSLER SHOWED himself to be

a more exciting pianist than most concertizing soloists now making the rounds. His unsurpassed clarity and the way he is able to detach each note in the run are certainly awesome. He is the guiding spirit of the group.

Cohen, an alumnus of the Juilliard String Quartet, was the least attractive of the three, most likely because it was always difficult to detect the soul of his expression.

Greenhouse, accompanist only so much of the time in these tries, nevertheless had a few moments when he could demonstrate his abundant talent. And when they did occur, they were always a pleasure.

Somehow it all fit together and worked very well indeed.

The final concert of the Chamber Music Society's current season will be on Tuesday, May 5, at Orchestra Hall, on the Juilliard String Quartet will perform the works of Mozart, Janacek and Verdi.



wine Richard Watson Dessert wines — a special breed

It is generally agreed that there are but three kinds of wine usually available to us — sparkling, fortified (sherry, port) and table wine. The last is so named because of its historical function as a meal accompaniment.

However, within that group, there are varying degrees of sweetness and dryness. Indeed, some wines are so sweet that they would spoil any main course with which they might be served.

And, they are made to do so. Because of their intensity, they are designed to be drunk after dinner or to accompany fruit, cheese or sherbet. They are warm, luscious, mouth-filling and very rich, usually low in alcohol and high in price.

Or the grapes can be infected, naturally or artificially with a mold that will attack certain kinds of grapes late in the season. This has the effect of squeezing out the more neutral juices in the grape, leaving only highly concentrated sugar. This mold, ignobly called "noble rot," is the agent of the greatest sweet wines in the world.

It nearly destroys the aesthetics of the grape, but does wondrous things for the slight amounts of juice they produce. Being of very low juice yield, wines such as this are extremely expensive to produce.

DESSERT WINES SUCH as these are produced throughout the world, but they have attained their greatest success in only a few regions.

Most esteemed by many are the wines of the Sauterne and Barsac regions of Bordeaux in France. Made from the Semillon grapes blended with Sauvignon Blanc (the latter is also used to make the great, dry white wines of Bordeaux), any wine from these regions priced in the \$25 range, and easily higher, is worth trying for that special occasion. A 10-year-old Sauterne will have developed hints of melon, peaches, berries — all lush and lingering.

THE SOURCE OF the sweetness comes, not from adding an alien substance to the brew, but from the natural process of fermentation. Grapes that are extremely ripe and containing high levels of natural sugar are used. Not all of this sugar is consumed in converting to alcohol in the fermentation process. This unconverted substance is known as "residual sugar," that is, it is left over after the fermenting wine has attained its natural level of 9-11 percent alcohol.

Holly Near performs at Rackham Memorial

Detroit Women's Music will present Redwood recording artist Holly Near with Adrienne Torf on piano and Carrie Barton on bass at 8 p.m. May 1 at the Rackham Memorial Auditorium in Detroit.

Detroit artist Judy Adams will open the show with a solo piano performance.

Holly Near is a poet and singer whose material ranges from personal relationships to political issues. She has performed with many stars including Bonnie Raitt, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Lily Tomlin and Jane Fonda.

She has her own recording company, Redwood Records, and has produced five albums of her own music. Her newest album "Fire in the Rain" is

available at many Detroit record stores.

Concert tickets are \$7 in advance, available at several locations including Martz in Birmingham. At the door tickets are \$8.

For students, seniors and the unemployed there is a \$6 ticket. For contributors a reserved-section \$12 ticket is available.

Both the \$8 and \$12 ticket must be ordered by mail. Money orders should be made payable to Detroit Women's Music and sent to Students for Alternative Education, Wayne State University, Box 8, Student Center Building, Detroit 48202.

For more information call 865-0058.

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