

ENTERTAINMENT

JOHN FRAYNE: REVIEW

C-U Symphony celebrates 50th



The 50th birthday of the Champaign-Urbana Symphony was celebrated at a concert on Friday night in the Foellinger

Great Hall before an audience in a party mood.

The opening tone poem "Quinquagenarium" ("Fiftieth Birthday" in Latin) by local composer and University of Illinois music Professor Rudolf Haken had a family air about it, replete with down-home references (the Altgeld Hall Chimes). It featured an electronic instrument called Continuum, described by Haken as "an electronic musical instrument invented by my brother Lippold Haken, and played by Mark Smart."

This instrument improvised the sound of an infant voice, symbolizing the birth of the orchestra as well as the sound of a voice saying "Happy Birthday." The voice thus "sampled" by the Continuum was that of Haken's sister Armgard, a violinist in the orchestra, whose birthday was the day of the concert.

The piece was jolly, with plenty of wake-up musical crashes. I missed the parody of the orchestra practicing the Beethoven "Emperor" Concerto, but I did get the loud "thunk" at the end, symbolizing the 1960 end of the Eisenhower administration ("Eisen" equals "iron" in German, get it?) Smart got some intriguing tones out of the

Continuum, but one would need a wider acquaintance with the instrument to evaluate its possibilities. The entire good-humored event reminded me of pieces with titles like "A Hunt in the Black Forest," popular in yesteryear.

The orchestra then launched into a virtuoso piece, "Twenty-six Variations on 'La Folia'" by the much maligned composer Antonio Salieri, who, in popular legend, poisoned Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. "La Folia" ("The Follies of Spain") was a tune, popular in the 17th century, which inspired countless composers to write variations on it. Salieri's piece, his last, was written in 1815, and it is full of ingenious combinations of orchestral sounds, and Steven Larsen and the symphony did a fine job of navigating Salieri's twists and turns. I have heard this piece before and I like it, but it does go on and on. It might be more effective with 10 fewer variations. By the end, poor old "Folia" seems varied to death. By the way, I do not remember the film "Amadeus" implying that Salieri "poisoned" Mozart. The program notes from "Wikipedia" state that Salieri is now forgotten. Not so; check the record catalogs. At the end of the Salieri piece, Larsen gestured for bows from concertmaster Dorothy Martirano and all the woodwind players.

Felix Mendelssohn's famous Violin Concerto drew from guest artist Gernot Winischhofer some delightful lyrical playing. Winischhofer,

born and educated in Vienna, clearly showed that city's famous preference for the sweeter end of the musical spectrum. In the more songful passages of this work, Winischhofer particularly excelled, but his more forceful playing also was impressive, especially in the finale, wherein Larsen and the symphony matched the violinist yard for yard in the race to the finish line. In the generous applause, some members in the audience downstairs rose to their feet.

Antonin Dvorak's Symphony No. 7 is certainly his most Brahmsian of his nine works in that genre, and its tragic finale reflects the composer's sad feelings at the death of his mother. Larsen and the symphony pulled out all the stops in the rousing climaxes of this work. The moments which most pleased me were the Bohemian folk music echoes which followed the grandiose orchestral tuttis. However, there were moments along the way when I thought the performance might have been improved by further rehearsal.

That said, the grand finale of the work was majestically realized, and evoked strong applause. Larsen called for well-deserved bows for the horns, trombones and trumpets.

Happy birthday, Champaign-Urbana Symphony! Why, the 100th anniversary is just around the corner, in 2060! I wonder what this fine orchestra will be playing then?