

Arthur Fiedler dishes out musical treacle, Barber of Seville is a sparkling put-on

The great thing about the Canadian Opera Company's production of Rossini's "The Barber of Seville" in the SUB Theatre last Thursday was that it made no pretensions about serving the mysterious goddess of culture; it was just good fun.

A delightfully bouncing and mischievous cast with Alexander Gray as Figaro, John Arab as Count Almaviva, and Shiela Piercey as Rosina, romped through the English translation of this 1816 musical situation comedy playing it to the hilt, and the audience of 300 went home laughing and satisfied.

But not so with old Arthur Fiedler and the Edmonton Symphony last Saturday night. Despite some feeble mumbblings in the program notes that this was "unpretentious" music, we were treated to an evening of schizophrenia with a program of musical treacle and 2,400 trained seals with flippers at attention ready to applaud any dead dish that came their way. And it was all in the cause of culture—or prairie culture at least—a mysterious amalgamation which sinks into that flat internal landscape of the local mind like a summer shower.

Just four or five more exposures and we'll be right up there with San Francisco—right, Lawrence Leonard?

The mess in music in this town

is partly the fault of Mr. Leonard, and partly the fault of compliant, but more sensitive, symphony-goers who swallow the sort of crap this basically-sound orchestra continues to dish out.

Is there a man in the house who can not hum The "Surprise" Symphony, The "Unfinished" Symphony, The Nutcracker Suite, The Roman Carnival Overture, and The "Romeo and Juliet" Overture?

But more of this later, and on with "The Barber of Seville".

This production takes no chances in setting the atmosphere.

The sets are light so they fit in the tour trunks, but they are neatly designed to suggest the lightness and floating fantasy of the piece as a whole. And John Fenwick carries the lightness further with his precise and well-disciplined orchestra of about 14 pieces.

The opera was not perfect, but after a slow start in Act I, particularly by John Arab, who had trouble deciding just how to play Almaviva, the illusion is locked in place. After that the company ran over the singing errors, which were few, but well-divided, among the cast, with a sheer vigour of presentation.

Gray, who played the scheming barber with the local opera, left the impression we'd see his face in some "Life" magazine investigation of the Cosa Nostra before the year is out. His big voice and comic

ability were a major part of the evening's success.

The third act was the flowering of this production. With a Hal-lowe'en pumpkin glowing gaily on top of the medicine chest at Dr. Bartolo's, the machinations of Figaro's plot to get Rosina away from the senile old doctor and into the grasp of Almaviva (all for a slight consideration) grind to a fast-paced climax. The style of this company is musical put-on, and they have developed it to a fine art. They spoof each other, wink at the audience, and strike a relentless series of poses. And even this is spoofed by the frozen figure of Bartolo (Oscar Faulfs) after he finds out what is really going on. The momentum of this production makes the singing flow out of the action. The music is never strained, but seems to belong with the laughter and fun.

The greatness of the "Barber" was its integration. The audience at least participated. This town needs more sparkling touches like the "Barber" to clear away the cultural sludge which clogs our thinking.

Now back to my complaint about the symphony.

Somehow I went expecting it to happen again, but in the sombre confines of the Jubilee Auditorium and saddle with a pile of semi-serious program notes and an audience trying to transfix itself

by closing its eyes and looking beatific, it was impossible. If one were to laugh (or maybe smile too broadly) at humorous music, there is a fear that half of the "serious" audience would dismember you.

But they all knew that Fiedler's encores were funny (Hadn't they heard it on the radio?) so they tittered politely. I felt sick.

Apart from that Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor was given an unemotional interpretation by Catherine Volpe, whose name may be spelt wrong because she was a last minute replacement for an ailing Jean-Pierre Vetter.

What is so annoying about this orchestra is that week after week they turn out the same old stuff for the same old audience. It is time for a change. Mr. Leonard should give this symphony direction. Concerts could investigate specific subjects. Why not an evening, using our own musicians as well as an outsider, to investigate the concerto form? What are the differences between musical periods? How did modern music develop?

This year's program is an insult. Next year the symphony must change its program and use the program notes to educate its audience. Right now the concerts are boring and the program notes are not much better than an ad-jective exercise.

—Brian Campbell

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November 12, 1968

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