

Orchestra can claim victory over Mahler's symphony; students performing operas: www.heraldtimesonline.com

By Peter Jacobi
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The face told it all.

As Charles Latshaw, music director of the Bloomington Symphony Orchestra, conducted his ensemble Saturday afternoon at the Unitarian Universalist Church, a beatific smile crossed his face. It kept returning, so obviously, so emotionally a smile of joy and pride.

He could see, better yet hear, that his intrepid players — members, mind you, of a part-time community orchestra — were on their way to claiming victory over what can be a hurdle for the best of the genre: Gustav Mahler's Symphony Number 1, called "Titan." A titanic work it is, close to an hour in length and written for champions.

The symphony is a marathon of challenges: those for the aggregate; those for groupings within the orchestra, whether they be violins or the beefed up horn section or most every other collective from clarinets to percussion, and those for solo instrumentalists faced with hazardous passages to negotiate.

And the above are just the technical obstacles to be overcome. Like every Mahler symphony, the First also expresses a host of intermingled human crises, natural wonders, and struggles between life and death.

Saturday's journey through the "Titan" was inspiring, yes, for the music itself, a masterpiece, but even more for what the Bloomington Symphony's musicians gave to perform it. They played their hearts out. Conductor Latshaw knew that. So did the audience, silent throughout, vociferous at the end.

There was enthusiastic applause earlier, too, when 16-year-old Brian Allen, winner of the Bloomington Symphony's 2010 Youth Concerto Competition, showed remarkable command in a performance of Maurice Ravel's "Tzigane," a tour-de-force that taxes the best and most mature of violinists. He whipped through its demands and dazzles ever so smoothly, and with the "fire and dash" of a violinist Ravel heard in concert, causing him to write the piece in the first place.

Searching for opera

With the IU Opera Theater shut down until fall because of the university's budget crunch, an opera devotee must hunt for alternatives. One came along for this devotee on Saturday evening in the form of a Graduate Opera Workshop, masterminded by director Carol Vaness, the renowned soprano and now Jacobs School professor with the knowhow only years of stage experience can shape.

Twenty-five singers, some of them engaged in several roles, worked their way through nine scenes of varying lengths, complexities and styles. They weren't of equal talent or state of development, but they all seemed enthusiastically engaged in opportunities to take to the stage in the Studio Opera space on the third floor of the Musical Arts Center.

A different group of Vaness-guided vocalists had sung the previous evening. A third set of young people — this one directed by another veteran professional, Sylvia McNair — will focus on Mozart operas during a workshop this afternoon at 5.

Saturday's scenes were taken from Rossini's "Cenerentola," Gounod's "Faust," Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro," Johann Strauss' "Fledermaus," Britten's "Midsummer Night's Dream," Offenbach's "Tales of Hoffmann," and three Verdi operas: "Rigoletto," "Masked Ball," and "Traviata."

Some of what one heard was very much on a "work-in-progress" level. But there were generous samplings of promise, too. And one could take special pleasure in listening to several outstanding voices, among them most prominently, bass Andrew Kroes as the scheming Mephistopheles from "Faust" and Dr. Miracle in "Tales of Hoffmann," bass baritone Ljubomir Puskaric as the vengeance-driven Renato in "Masked Ball," and soprano Ashleigh Guida as the Countess in "Marriage of Figaro."

Special mention should go to pianist Piotr Wisniewski, who busily served as "orchestra" all evening.