"Legendary Lovers" Review- The Chicago Philharmonic opens the 2016-2017 season of "Love" at Pick-Staiger Hall

By Debra Davy

The Chicago Philharmonic gave the first performance of its 2016-2017 “Love” season, its 27th, entitled “Legendary Lovers”, on Sunday, September 18th at Pick-Staiger Hall in Evanston. It was a strategically selected and beautifully rendered celebration of great operatic couples in love: Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, Ruslan and Ludmila, Tony and Maria, and Daphnis and Chloe. Soprano Emily Birsan and Tenor John Irvin thrilled and stirred the emotions of the packed audience under the energetic baton of Conductor Scott Speck. Before and after the concert, and during the intermission, Krista Hagglund and Anna Hirons of the Belle Harmonie harp duo serenaded patrons in the capacious foyer of the concert hall.
First on the bill were the Prelude and “Liebestod”, or “love death” from the 1859 opera by Richard Wagner; it is the final, climactic and dramatic music from the opera, and refers to the theme of erotic death as Isolde sings over Tristan’s dead body. In a transport of ecstasy, she envisions him as alive, and rhapsodizes on the vision in what has been called “some of the most affectingly beautiful music ever written”, then sinks apparently lifeless onto his corpse while the orchestra comes to a harmonic resolution that was drawing nearer and nearer throughout the entire opera. The music was swelling and strong, drenched with feeling and never sentimental.

“Romeo et Juliette” is an opera in five acts by Charles Gounod, first performed in 1867, and was described after it’s premiere as “a series of very pretty duets”; the libretto follows Shakespeare’s tragedy very closely. “O nuit divine; Ah! Ne fuis pas encore!” (or “Oh night divine- Ah, do not flee again)“ is from the balcony scene at the close of the second act. Birsan and Irvin, clasping each other, their faces suffused with emotion, sang beseechingly as the Philharmonic brought forth this lovely score to perfection.

The overture to “Ruslan and Ludmila”, an opera in five acts, Scott Speck advised the audience, was composed by Mikhail Glinka, “the father of Russian romantic music”, based on a poem of Alexander Pushkin; Glinka began “the development of full melodies”. It is interesting to note that Pushkin could not write the libretto himself as planned because of his death in a famous duel! Composed between 1837 and 1842, the best-known music from the opera today is its overture. The piece employs elements of Russian folk music, “imaginative dissonance”, Eastern elements, and, as noted by Speck, the use of the entire tone scale.
Finally, the first half of the program gave the audience the wondrous voices of the guest opera stars in “Signor ne principe” from Scene 2 of the opera “Rigoletto” by Giuseppe Verdi, first performed in 1851. Considered by many to be “the first of the operatic masterpieces of Verdi’s middle to late career”, it is a tragic story which revolves around a beautiful daughter, a licentious Duke and a hunch-backed jester. In this stirring scene, the Duke overhears Rigoletto’s daughter Gilda confess to her nurse that she has fallen in love with a young man she met at church. He seduces the girl, a curse is leveled on them, and -of course- tragedy ensues. Verdi based the opera upon a five-act play by Victor Hugo, explaining “the subject is grand and immense”-certainly this is true of the score.

After the intermission, the Philharmonic performed three more great pieces, with the second blending seamlessly into the first without a break.

Speck enthusiastically introduced the 3 movements from “Music For Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet” by David Diamond, 1947- the “Overture”, “Juliet and her Nurse” and the “Balcony Scene”-explaining that “the works are not often played in Chicago”. They are strong, dramatic, and economical in composition and execution- a truly modern, assured and assuredly non-syrupy triumphant score.

Before the audience realized the Diamond trio had ended, the Philharmonic segued into “The Balcony Scene” from “West Side Story”, 1957 by Leonard Bernstein. The strikingly lovely Birsan and darkly handsome Irvin’s voices blended beautifully and, for this reviewer, refreshingly in English as they gave us the lush “Tonight”. The audience and the singers were all moved and excited as the familiar and haunting timeless music filled the hall.
Finally, the concert closed with "Lever de Jour", “Pantomime” and "Danse generale” from part 3 of “Daphnis and Chloe, Suite 2” by Maurice Ravel, which premiered in 1912. Speck explained with his characteristic boyish enthusiasm that the ballet in one act and three scenes includes “the depiction of sunrise” and “action with nymphs”. “We can hear the bad guy a bit”, he mused. Happily, we are told, “in the end the lovers are reunited”. The music reached a fever pitch of erotic intensity and brought the audience to its feet.

Haunted Hearts- The Next Concert

In time for Halloween, the Chicago Philharmonic's 2016-17 season dedicated to love continues October 30 with Haunted Hearts, conjuring up bittersweet past loves, nightmarish scenes, and the bug that got away. Hear Bach's Brandenburg Concert No. 5 (with its dizzying harpsichord cadenza), Bernard Herrmann's cataclysmic Psycho score, and Piazzolla's wistful, tango-infused Oblivion. PLUS, Tim Hopper of the Steppenwolf Theatre provides unforgettable narration, and expert theremin player Mysterion performs eerie pre-concert music

Come in costume if you dare!
For more information on the "Love" season and other great upcoming performances by The Chicago Philharmonic, go to The Chicago Philharmonic website

Published on Sep 30, 2016