

## **Classical concert season brought blessings, a few blemishes**

By **Mark Kanny**

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Just as the weather, if not the calendar, tells us summer is here, so too the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's final subscription concerts last weekend marked the conclusion of the classical concert season that stretches from fall through spring. The mix of rewards and frustrations were, in some cases, normal varieties of concert life, but in others sounded cautionary notes.

### **PITTSBURGH SYMPHONY**

The Pittsburgh Symphony was in transition this season, between the departure of music director Mariss Jansons and the arrival of the triumvirate that follows him: music adviser Sir Andrew Davis, Jan Pascal Tortelier and Marek Janowski. Although the current season was not a great one artistically, it was far superior to the transition year between Lorin Maazel and Jansons, 1996-97. However, the symphony's midseason decision not to pursue the possibility of a European tour next fall was deeply disappointing.

It augurs well for the future that both weeks of concerts Davis led here this season -- a Russian program that included a brilliant performance by violinist Sarah Chang and "The Dream of Gerontius" this past weekend -- were high points of the season.

The Heinz Hall debuts of conductors Marin Alsop, Martin Haselbock and Nicholas McGegan were occasions of vibrant music making that should lead to return engagements.

Two other weekends of concerts under Charles Dutoit, each followed by a tour, presented the Pittsburgh Symphony at its best. So too did Sir Neville Marriner's recent concerts combining Ralph Vaughan Williams' "London Symphony" and Johannes Brahms' Violin Concerto -- performances that would be a highpoint of any season anywhere.

But the Pittsburgh Symphony played under too many conductors this season, and too many proved mediocre, if that. Poor interpretations of Fifth Symphonies by Ludwig van Beethoven and Jan Sibelius by the youngish David Robertson and the older David Zinman showed age is not the issue.

Although Pinchas Zukerman is one of the world's great musicians, his lack of sympathy for full-orchestra repertoire made three of his concerts frustrating -- including opening night's. In the case of Robert Schumann's Second Symphony, Zukerman's performance this season was a real decline from the vitality he achieved with the same piece in 1999.

When the music being performed is great and the orchestra playing it is great, such wide variations in quality of performance as were encountered at Heinz Hall this season only emphasize the crucial role of the conductor.

There were many fine international soloists, but concertmaster Andres Cardenes was actually far more satisfying than one of the world's most famous classical musicians, Midori, whose season-opening account of Beethoven's Violin Concerto was negligible. Another demonstration that name recognition is

not necessarily related to artistic quality was Lang Lang's self-indulgent performance of Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1.

Finally, the Mendelssohn Choir's transparency, beautiful tone and musical nuances at Heinz Hall this season were a tribute to outgoing music director Robert Page. He also led a superb performance of the season's best new music -- Nancy Galbraith's "Requiem" -- on the Mendelssohn's own series of concerts.

## **PITTSBURGH OPERA**

At the Benedum Center, the character of Pittsburgh Opera's "bold new voice" followed the pattern set its first year. The biggest improvement is musical -- in better casts, and vastly improved orchestral performance and interpretation led by music director John Mauceri. Staging is often problematic. The goofy production of "The Marriage of Figaro" in November, like last season's "Julius Caesar," was far worse than anything I saw by Tito Capobianco at Pittsburgh Opera.

Stagings come and go, but it is music that makes operas endure. Hearing Ruth Ann Swenson sing Marguerite in "Faust" was the vocal highpoint, followed by French soprano Annick Massis in another role debut as Violetta in "La Traviata." But for special treats, soprano Jane Eaglen's substitution for an ill singer in the title role of "Fidelio" was a true luxury.

## **AND BEYOND**

Despite Pittsburgh's many citywide problems, including declining population and economic issues, the quality of musical life here remains wondrously world-class. For example:

- Pittsburgh Chamber Music Society maintains its high quality by selecting guest artists by quality of performance more than reputation. Its presentation of the Takacs Quartet playing the complete quartets of Bela Bartok was arguably the top event of the season.
- Ludwig van Beethoven's music for cello and piano was far better served at Duquesne University by Anne Martindale Williams and David Allen Wehr than by Chamber Music Society's David Finckel and Wu Han.
- The Pittsburgh Renaissance and Baroque Society's commitment to 500 years of repertoire is particularly important -- especially when performances are as distinguished as ones this season by soprano Ellen Hargis with Seattle Baroque and Andrew Manze with the English Consort.

*Mark Kanny can be reached at [mkanny@tribweb.com](mailto:mkanny@tribweb.com) or (412) 320-7877.*