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Monday, December 8, 2008

A Classical Season

Classical Preview

By John Jahn



The **Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra's** Holiday Pops concerts are a well-known and fine annual tradition, but what about a more classical-music-oriented program? The MSO, thankfully, provides us with just such a gift.

What better way to start off than with a spirited overture? The MSO (under Resident Conductor Stuart Chafetz) performs the Overture to *Le Nozze di Figaro*, K. 492 by Mozart (1756-91). Perhaps Mozart's most beloved curtain raiser, its style is based upon the fast-slow-fast form of the Neapolitan *sinfonia*, nicely setting the mood for the comedy to follow.

A couple of themes used in Ralph Vaughan Williams' 1929 Shakespearean opera *Sir John in Love* lent themselves winningly to his ever-popular *Fantasia on Greensleeves* by (1872-1958). An arrangement for harp, flute and strings is the version most people are familiar with, utilizing both the *Greensleeves* theme (used as an entr'acte in the opera) and the Norfolk song *Lovely Joan* that Vaughan Williams had made use of elsewhere in the opera. The result is a melodious, meditative work perfect for a winter's eve.

Though opera on the grandest of scales was clearly his milieu, Richard Wagner (1813-83) occasionally produced works outside the genre, the most touching of which is the *Siegfried Idyll*. The work's premiere was perhaps the sweetest of all premieres. Having prepared and rehearsed the work in secret, Wagner gathered his small ensemble together on the stairway of his house on Christmas morning, 1870, and awakened his wife, Cosima, with its opening strains-an intimate and highly personal work honoring their son (Siegfried) as well as Cosima's birthday the day before.

Of the hundreds of works the Baroque concerto master Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) composed, none are more famous than the four collectively known as *The Four Seasons*, Op. 8, of which the MSO performs the final concerto in the group: *Winter*. Opus 8, No. 4's dissonance and bleakness create a severe but evocative portrait of the season, but also provide a striking summation for the season-themed concertos and for the year as well.

Premiering just days after the 1885 unveiling of a statue of writer, essayist, philosopher, historian and playwright Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754) in his hometown of Bergen, Norway, was the piano suite *From Holberg's Time*, Op. 40 by Edvard Grieg (1843-1907). The work proved so popular that Grieg arranged it for string orchestra. and in that form it has endeared itself to the world as one of classical

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...and, and in that form it has succeeded from the more serious of classical

music's loveliest miniatures. Though Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) composed only four orchestral suites among his vast oeuvre, they remain some of his most popular and often performed. Maestro Chafetz leads the MSO in Bach's *Orchestral Suite No. 1* in C Major, BWV 1066 (1725). Perhaps the most old-fashioned of the four, the work boasts a dominant overture in the French style followed by several dances such as gavottes, minuets and bourrées.

Finally, the audience will be called upon to bring the evening to a close with the rousing *Hallelujah Chorus* from the *The Messiah*, HWV 56 by George Frideric Handel (1685-1759). *The Messiah* heralded Handel's last great phase of oratorio composition-the most profound statement of Christian faith in his entire output.

These concerts take place Dec. 17 and 18 at St. Josaphat Basilica, Dec. 19 at St. John Cathedral and Dec. 20 at the Sharon Lynne Wilson Center in Brookfield.

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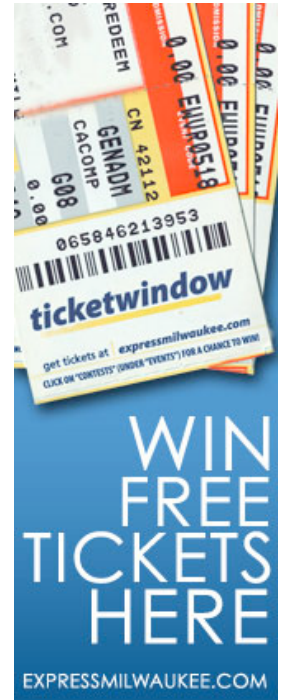


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