

A program fit for King memorial 'Martin' skillfully links historical footnotes with musical themes

By Marta Tonegutti

Published January 17, 2007

Classical Review

Led by indefatigable maestro Paul Freeman, the Chicago Sinfonietta offered its annual tribute to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in a special program Monday at Symphony Center that combined past and present, memory and hope. The highlight was the world premiere of the musical narrative "Martin, Coretta and Rosa: A Portrait in Words and Music," with text by African-American history scholar Lerone Bennett Jr. The Sinfonietta commissioned the work to commemorate the lives of civil-rights pioneers King; his wife, Coretta Scott King, and Rosa Parks.

The program, which also was performed Sunday at Dominican University in River Forest, also featured works in different genres and for different media, including Lyric for Strings by Pulitzer Prize winner George Walker and Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 1 (with a virtuoso solo performance by high school piano prodigy Jeremy Ajani Jordan).

With Bennett doubling as narrator and Chicago soprano Jonita Lattimore as vocal soloist, "Martin, Coretta, and Rosa" skillfully combined historical narration with quotations from speeches and other texts, and wove together spirituals with musical themes from William Grant Still's Afro-American Symphony and Dvorak's "New World" Symphony. The narrator was often enveloped by the rich orchestral sonority, while the singer either soared above it or stood alone, drained of all surrounding sound to delve into the depths of sorrow and hope embodied in the music. Lattimore's vibrant and velvety voice was perfect for the part, as was her confident and restrained interpretation. Bennett's dramatic reading was eloquent and impassioned, evoking an immediate emotional response from the attentive audience.

The evening opened with Walker's Lyric for Strings (1946), a slow and meditative piece built around subtle textural changes and colored by pervasive chromaticism. The Sinfonietta's assured performance continued with the Prokofiev concerto featuring Chicago pianist Jordan, the 17-year-old winner of the Steinway Piano Concerto Competition and many other awards. In full command of the concerto's many technical demands, from percussive chords to prestissimo passagework, the young pianist displayed a compelling maturity of technique and interpretation in this extremely challenging three-movement piece.

After the intermission, choristers from the Apostolic Church of God's Sanctuary Chorus, the choirs of the College of Lake County and the Gospel Music Workshop of America at Dominican University performed an impressive a cappella piece. Then Freeman, the Sinfonietta's beloved musical director, returned to the podium for three more choral works: a traditional spiritual, a modern gospel work by Richard Smallwood and an arrangement of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus," all performed to the combined sounds of orchestra and jazz band.

The program ended with "We Shall Overcome," led again by maestro Freeman, who invited audience members to stand and hold hands while they joyously sang along with orchestra and chorus.

Sinfonietta's diverse program reflects King's legacy

By Cathryn Wilkinson
Published January 16, 2007

Music Review

Hearing the Chicago Sinfonietta's Tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Jan. 14, in Dominican University's Lund Auditorium was a little like settling in for a long reception line of unrelated visitors—each stopping by with a friendly and imaginative word, and all dressed with high professionalism. True to their mission, "Musical excellence through diversity," the Sinfonietta's polished line-up was part concert and part pep rally, fire, brimstone, history, and call to arms—that is, arms of a distinctly nonviolent variety.

With over four decades of hindsight, Americans have made much of King's immortal "I Have a Dream" manifesto. Paul Freeman, founder and music director of the Sinfonietta, interprets King's credo as a challenge to embrace America's richly diverse peoples and culture. And so, through an array of moods and styles, he offered a musically diverse program, from the intensely poignant "Lyric for Strings" by African-American George Walker to the syncopated fervor of Richard Smallwood's "Anthem of Praise" on the text of Psalm 150.

The oldest and perhaps most traditional work on the program was performed by the youngest: the tall and distinguished Jeremy Ajani Jordan, a 17-year-old prodigy from Chicago. Jordan's concentration and solid leadership as soloist in Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 1 are hallmarks of a rare natural talent. He engaged in an easy dialogue with the orchestra, almost like a chemist carefully mixing a magic potion, not hampered in the least by the demanding cascades of rippling scales—in D-flat no less! This young pianist's superbly assured performance gives hope for a future generation that will be stirred by the challenges and rewards in the canon of fine art music.

The newest work was the world premiere of Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s "Martin, Coretta, and Rosa: A Musical Portrait." A former classmate of King's and one of his biographers, Mr. Bennett recounted the King legacy with the sounds of the orchestra sensitively hovering in the background.

In the foreground was soprano Jonita Lattimore, a woman with a wall of a voice. The creative pairing of the so-called "Goin' Home," in the style of an American spiritual from Dvorák's Ninth Symphony with excerpts from William Grant Still's Afro-American Symphony of 1930 gave this historical narrative a fresh immediacy. Part prose and part news, interspersed with poetic couplets, Bennett's delivery made the main characters seem like real people instead of textbook patriots.

Ms. Lattimore riveted the audience with both her sparkling upper range and husky lower register—all notes called up in her intense proclamation of faith and highly ornamented improvisations of "Amazing Grace," "Witness," "Honor to the Dying Lamb," and "Ride On, King Jesus!"

From Russian virtuosity and American memorials, the concert turned to a rousing shout of victory at the intermission announcement of the Bears' overtime win. Then it was on to a sampling of works from the African-American choral repertoire, performed by the 40-voice Gospel Choir of the College of Lake County. Their director, Charles Clency, shared the honors with Maestro Freeman. Strains of Handel peeked through the jazzy piano and drum combo in the "Hallelujah Chorus" from Messiah: A Soulful Celebration. Singing with heart, stepping with drive, and diverse in age, stature, and race, this choir embodied King's vision of fervently reaching for the dream. Together with the audience, an optimistic and nostalgic "We Shall Overcome" brought the program to a close.

While this program was heavy on the musical contributions of black culture, both black and white audience members at this event were sent out with a common call to action. In Bennett's words: "It only lasted a moment, but Americans saw the possibility of an America that has not yet been discovered. What are we doing to make sure that he did not die in vain?"

The Chicago Sinfonietta performs again at Lund Auditorium on the Dominican University campus Sunday, March 18, featuring Christopher Parkening, guitar and Jubilant Sykes, baritone.

Sinfonietta jubilant amid loss Church fire, Parks' death weigh on King Day concert

By Michael Cameron
Special to the Tribune
Published January 16, 2006

Chicago Sinfonietta's annual concerts on Martin Luther King Jr. Day have long been the locus of regional artistic salutes to the late civil rights leader. While the concert was as upbeat as any of the previous events, this year's program at Orchestra Hall under Paul Freeman was nevertheless tinged by the memory of two painful losses since the last celebration.

The concert was dedicated to the memory of the recently deceased Rosa Parks. But even fresher in the minds of many in the audience was the recent fire that consumed Pilgrim Baptist Church in Bronzeville on the South Side.

If King had one pre-eminent musical muse, it was Mahalia Jackson, the incomparable divine diva of gospel music who was a member of that church's congregation. Her deeply felt renditions of gospel standards (many composed by Pilgrim's Rev. Thomas A. Dorsey, the creator of the medium) set the stage for many of King's historic speeches.

Would King's musical cadences in "I Have a Dream" have had the same history-altering effect had they not been swathed in Jackson's glorious contralto, honed for local worshipers at the magnificent Sullivan-Adler edifice on South Indiana Avenue?

Maestro Paul Freeman was determined to create some fresh musical memories of his own. He opened with Tchaikovsky's "Romeo and Juliet" in a reading that may have lacked visceral punch due to the reduced string sections, but more than compensated with lucid textural refinement.

This evergreen can often feel like a series of loosely connected episodes, succeeding on the strength of its impossibly catchy tunes. Freeman's unflappable precision through a series of tempo changes lent the work a cohesion rarely sensed.

Michael Abels' "American Variations on 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot'" was a potpourri of vernacular styles, dressed up with lush orchestration redolent of mid-century Hollywood films and Gershwin scores. The mostly improvised trumpet solos were commissioned by Doc Severinsen, but on this occasion Larry Bowen provided the nimble, bluesy licks.

If ever a child's name boldly proclaimed his parents' aspirations, it would be the musically monikered Mozart Camargo Guarnieri. This Brazilian composer's "Three Dances for Orchestra" is music suffused with Latin flavor. The best was the third, "Danza Brasileira," a sultry, mysterious nocturne bathed in muted, dark colors. This was perfect fodder for the fluid choreography of Kevin lega Jeff and Gary Abbott of the Deeply Rooted Dance Theater.

The Chicago Children's Choir and the Elmhurst College Concert Choir then joined the orchestra for Leonard Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms." If these youngsters were intimidated by the irregular meters of Bernstein's score and the hallowed setting of Orchestra Hall, they hid it well. They were utterly secure in pitch and tone, and filled the hall with seamless, well-rounded tone.

Stirring Sinfonietta tribute to civil rights leader

By Michael Cameron

Special to the Tribune

Published January 19, 2005

There were no doubt many methods of remembrance Monday for Martin Luther King Jr. Day. For area music lovers, the place to be was Orchestra Hall, at the Chicago Sinfonietta's stirring tribute to the civil rights leader.

Schubert's Symphony No. 8 in B Minor, the "Unfinished," was an inspired choice to open the program. Conductor Paul Freeman's reading was expressive, expansive, yet understated, and his string players responded with beautifully hushed legato phrasing. The second movement ambled at a brisk pace, highlighted by lyrical solo turns from oboist Ricardo Castaneda and clarinetist Mel Warner.

Adolphus Hailstork's "Epitaph for a Man Who Dreamed" opened serenely in the lower strings, not unlike the Schubert symphony, but this time with gentle dissonances that slowly resolved in the course of the work. The orchestral fabric served as a backdrop for narration on the life of King, delivered with conviction by two members of Congo Square Theater, Aaron Todd Douglas and Ann Joseph.

The text not only related the familiar account of King's struggles for racial equality, but also described his rejection of violence and his advocacy of economic justice.

The musical forces swelled considerably in the second half for Michael Abels' "Dance for Martin's Dream," as the Sinfonietta was joined by the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra.

The work began with mournful trumpets accompanied by chorale-like sustained strings. The main body of the work is an amalgamation of various dance-like episodes.

Latin percussion dominated at the outset, as layers of jazz riffs often wrapped in multiple meters were woven into a delightfully raucous tapestry. At one point some bluegrass riffs appeared in the violins only to be subsumed by the chanting of syllables in the orchestra, a rough facsimile of hip-hop. Freeman was unflappable amid the cacophony, though the piece would have benefited from more unhinged shouting from the timid string players.

Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" served as the grand finale, with additional brass players blaring triumphantly from the balcony.

It was an inspirational evening for all, with the possible exception of a few unfortunate patrons who had to endure the caterwauling of a certain music critic during the audience rendition of "We Shall Overcome."