

International Trumpet Guild Review

May 31, 2007

Washington Symphonic Brass "At the Movies," a superb event in UMass Amherst's fine concert hall, left the audience dazzled by the ensemble's virtuosity and impressed and intrigued by the quality of the arrangements. I'm going to wear out keys on this PC if I keep typing the words "in a great arrangement by Phil Snedecor" so please just take it as read except where otherwise noted.

First up was the Rocky fanfare by Bill Conti, blazing away across the stage and setting the scene for an exciting evening. As a child I was a big James Bond fan - indeed I seem to recall I actually was James Bond for a year or two - so I was thrilled by the next item, a James Bond Medley which took us on a fast ride through some of the classic tunes by Monty Norman, John Barry, and others. The tuba made a very fine substitute for the solo guitar in the James Bond Theme itself and it's probably fair to say that Nobody Does It Better than Phil Snedecor did on flugel for the very nice tune of that name. A blisteringly fast On Her Majesty's Secret Service followed, leading on to a virtuoso For Your Eyes Only, before a suitably threatening Goldfinger moved the medley towards its close. Bliss, the whole thing - now where did I park the Aston Martin?

WSB's Music Director Milton Stevens warned us to look out for the "ominous, spooky" beginning to Batman Returns and he and the ensemble delivered the Caped Crusader's threat, or promise, in full measure, starting with horns over low brass keeping the tension high. Stevens also challenged us to identify the final chord of this piece: I haven't yet so Milt, please get in touch - my ignorance is showing. In his introduction to the John Williams Medley which followed, Stevens paid tribute to Williams's incredible output of film tunes over the decades. The selection which followed (co-arranged by Daniel Havens) started with the Star Wars main theme and worked its way round, via classic themes from other films, back to an Imperial March which would have had you hissing the wicked Vader while admiring the drive and style of the WSB's performance. In this, as in the rest of the concert, the excellent brass playing was underpinned by the great contribution of the percussion section who provided drive and power in an impressively unruffled manner.

After the interval came a real treat, Part I of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring. I have to confess that I had my doubts about this but they turned out to be utterly unfounded - this superb arrangement made fantastic use of the brass and percussion colours to recreate and complement the original. I suppose it was a revelation to me not unlike when I first heard Howarth's Pictures arrangement - it more than answered the question "why do this for brass ensemble?" The WSB gave this work the precision and vigour it needed and by the time they'd finished their fiery and inspiring performance my only reservation was that I'd like them to do Part II as well, please.

Next came Jean Francoise Tallaird's arrangement of three tunes from West Side Story which were given a beautifully liquid, focused performance with warmth and depth much in evidence. The program ended with Orff's O Fortuna from Carmina Burana where euphonium player Jennifer Jester's sudden appearance on piano lent extra rhythmic impetus to a fine performance. I say "the program ended" but there was no way this audience was going home (or to the bar) without an encore. For a moment I was surprised when the Rocky fanfare started up again - surely they're not just going to repeat that? - but all was explained when the music took a turn in the direction marked "loud" and Patrick Hession strolled on stage - my goodness, what a Maynard-style extravaganza this last tune became. Like the rest of the audience I left bowled over by the versatility and skill of the Washington Symphonic Brass and with the memory of a really great concert full of variety and flair. Nice one, Milt and the WSB.