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## Leonard Bernstein comes alive at Civic Center

However, rest of Peoria Symphony Orchestra performance shined with enthusiasm

Monday, September 17, 2007

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BY GARY PANETTA

**PEORIA** - No doubt Leonard Bernstein's "Symphonic Dances from West Side Story" was the crowd-pleaser Saturday at the Civic Center Theater.

But the really interesting music was on the rest of the Peoria

Symphony Orchestra's "Red, White and Blue" program: Jennifer Higdon's "Blue Cathedral," John Corigliano's "Suite from the Red Violin" and Charles Tomlinson Griffes' "The White Peacock."

To be sure, these pieces received polite applause, and guest violinist Lara St. John received something more than polite applause for her intense solo effort in "The Red Violin."

But this response was nothing compared with the spontaneous outburst of enthusiasm reserved for the selections from "West Side Story," which closed the concert. Musical Director David Commanday wisely milked this response for all it was worth, even doing an encore and encouraging the audience to shout "Mambo!" as well as inspiring his musicians to make the most of this difficult music, with its snazzy rhythms and the exciting panoply of percussion and brass. Clearly, "West Side Story" is a classic.

But it's also a familiar classic, especially in Peoria where Bernstein has been heard on community theater stages, in amateur chorale groups and elsewhere. Believe me, Bernstein has followed me into my dreams - which is why, for me, Commanday's other choices mattered more.

"The Blue Cathedral," for instance, matters because it offers a needed glimpse into how people compose music today, rather than 100, or even 50, years ago. (By classical standards, the piece's creator, Jennifer Higdon, is a mere child - born in 1962.) The piece is superb, even visionary, and began quietly with an air of mystery: Tinkling bells, chimes, splashes of understated orchestral color. Then, came a sense of something building. Ascending musical lines made you feel as if you were going up and up. As the music unfolded - a shimmering, weird crescendo led into a staccato brass section - there was a sense of approaching something, attaining a realization of some sort. The piece ended like it began: With a ghostly shimmer. (The effect in part was produced by players who shook Chinese bells in their hands as the music faded.)

Such imaginative writing was matched by the efforts of another living composer, John Corigliano. His "Red Violin" is full of sonic

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wonders: The spectral-sounding strings, for instance, which created the illusion of music played at a great distance, perhaps off stage somewhere; or the brutal snap of wood boards and other percussion instruments, which dramatically punctuated a passionate violin solo by St. John.

In some ways, this piece was perfect for this remarkable soloist: It's full of pyrotechnics; sudden shifts from high to low; colorful slides down the fretboard; lovely melodies; brooding passages. Had St. John played a more familiar piece, the crowd would have been on its feet instantly.

Nevertheless, it was once again good to hear a piece by a living, breathing composer.

The one dead composer on the program - other than Bernstein - was Charles Tomlinson Griffes, who may indeed owe something to Claude Debussy, but who is an original voice in his own right. (I highly recommend recordings of his music, available on Naxos.com). In "The White Peacock," Griffes conjures an effable, fragile dream world of beauty, a world convincingly brought to life by the orchestra. It's a vision that only the eternally young at heart could have - the vision, unfortunately, of a man who died just shy of his 36th birthday.



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