

City & Region

Slee Sinfonietta opens with brilliantly executed program

By Daniel J. Kushner

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The Slee Sinfonietta opened its 2012-13 concert season Monday night in the University at Buffalo's Lippes Concert Hall with a brilliantly executed, if unsurprising program.

For being the "flagship ensemble" of UB's Robert and Carol Morris Center for 21st Century Music, the Sinfonietta is stubbornly stuck in the 20th century. Of the works performed - written by Alban Berg, György Ligeti and John Adams - the most recent piece was Adams' "Chamber Symphony," composed in 1992.

Also, the evening began with the Berg duet "Four Pieces for Clarinet and Piano," which felt out of place alongside the other compositions for full chamber ensemble.

Fortunately, the success or failure of the evening's music would not ultimately rest with the choice of repertoire performed, but rather with the guest conductor tasked with its interpretation. At age 28, Robert Trevino is a prolific and seasoned conductor whose career credits already include performances at the Bolshoi Theatre and the Tanglewood Music Festival.

Given that Trevino has conducted numerous world premieres as part of New York City Opera's VOX: American Opera Series, I couldn't help but think that there was a squandered opportunity to cater Monday's program in some way to this proven affinity - especially in light of Berg ("Wozzeck," "Lulu"), Ligeti ("Le grande macabre"), and Adams's ("Nixon in China," "Doctor Atomic") respective reputations as composers of fascinating and seminal operas.

These programmatic caveats would prove to be minor, however.

The Slee Sinfonietta's performance of Berg's "Chamber Concerto for piano, violin, and 13 wind instruments" displayed the composer's ingenious infusion of wistful phrasing and lovely melodic fragments amid what could have sounded like hasty interruptions and musical chaos in the hands of less skilled musicians.

The ensemble's intensity and poise fit excellently with Trevino's demonstrative style. With his impeccable command of Berg's unfettered rhythmic flow and complex textural interplay, the Sinfonietta communicated the full breadth of anxiety, pathos and beauty in the music. It felt as if the conductor were prying open the dense orchestration to illuminate the sumptuous yet terse melodies nested inside, waiting to be discovered by the listener.

Like Berg's "Chamber Concerto," Ligeti's "Melodien" utilizes the sound of the individual instruments to imply melody rather than to present an obvious melodic statement outright.

The overall aesthetic effect was different, though - higher tessituras and thin, almost sheer timbres created a more open space, filling the saturated atmosphere with mystical overtones that Berg's more earthy, visceral style did not.

Once again, Trevino's supreme attention to detail and mastery of mood guaranteed a powerful performance.

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