



UAPRESENTS STUDENT CRITIC PROGRAM

Venice Baroque Orchestra: “The Seasons Project” Review

By Kelly Berger

From the moment they took the stage, the members of the Venice Baroque Orchestra emitted an aura of class, confidence and professionalism. Each instrumentalist took his or her spot behind a music stand and waited quietly, yet energetically, for their cue to begin playing. Each member wore black formal clothing that beautifully contrasted the polished auburn colored string instruments. The professionalism of their attire coupled with their smiling faces captured the audience’s attention immediately. Without a word, lead violinist, Robert McDuffie, lifted his instrument into the air and with an unspoken cue; the orchestra began to perform “Spring”, the first concerto of Antonio Vivaldi’s well-known masterpiece, “The Four Seasons”.

The orchestra took the audience through “Spring”, “Summer”, “Fall”, and “Winter” with an ease and mastery that was mesmerizing. Complete with a lute and a harpsichord, the 18 instrumentalists remained standing in a semi-circle throughout the concert, with featured soloist McDuffie in the center. The orchestra seemed to be extremely well-rehearsed; each member exuded confidence and the instruments sounded very unified. The lack of a conductor made McDuffie’s subtle visual cues important for the other instrumentalists to follow, which they did flawlessly. After a short intermission, the orchestra played Philip Glass’ “The American Four Seasons”, which he composed specifically for McDuffie as an answer to Vivaldi’s original work. The absence of names allowed the audience to determine what movement was inspired by each season. I had difficulty doing so, because each movement sounded similarly haunting and foreboding. With the exception of McDuffie’s violin solo interludes, it was additionally difficult to distinguish each movement from one another. The music was extremely beautiful and satisfying to listen to, but the contrast between each movement that is so prevalent in Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons” was missing in Glass’ modern work. However, the use of an electronic keyboard gave Glass’ piece a sound that was quite different from Vivaldi’s, and I found that contrast interesting.

One of the most impressive aspects of the Venice Baroque Orchestra was the expressiveness with which they played. The instrumentalists interacted with each other using many facial expressions. These expressions were extremely enjoyable to observe, and correlated with the mood of whichever piece was being played at the time. Ivano Zanenghi, the lute player, laughed and silently joked with McDuffie while the violinists smiled and even winked at each another during lively segments of music. During more melancholy parts of the concert, McDuffie and other performers closed their eyes, moved their bodies expressively and seemed to be lost in the music or their own inner dialogue. In fact, McDuffie’s position at center stage and lack of a music stand gave him plenty of room to move. He made the violin look like an extension of his body, the way it moved fluidly with his arm. At times it even seemed that the instruments themselves were conversing with each other - sometimes with happiness, anger, or competitiveness. The expressiveness on stage translated into the audience. As I looked around the theater, it seemed that every person had their eyes locked on the stage and most people smiled as they were mesmerized by the uniformity, sincerity, and power with which the orchestra members played and expressed themselves.

Overall, the Venice Baroque Orchestra played a concert full of emotion and tremendous talent that was a special treat to experience.