

Review - QuintEssence

Kelowna Community Concerts March 17

Opera. There are few forms of musical performance more polarizing than this genre. Fans of it go into raptures over the beautiful writing, stunning melodies, dramatic stories and orchestrations, and the undeniably remarkable vocal abilities of its best singers. (Kelowna itself has some operatic voices that will leave even the most jaded listener breathless). Detractors will often speak of indecipherable words (even in their own language), overblown vibrato, lacklustre acting (it is technically musical theatre after all) and the perception of pretentiousness that goes along with the whole opera scene. The Kelowna Community Concert performance on March 17 by Quintessence was in my opinion an excellent bridge between the two opposing camps.

The five piece group (hence the clever title) consisted of Robyn Driedger-Klassen (soprano), Barbara Towell (mezzo-soprano), Frederik Robert (tenor), Peter Alexander (baritone), and Tina Chang (pianist). At the outset the group set a casual theme, joking, laughing, even attired in a manner more relaxed than that of a "typical" operatic performance and from the opening piece by Verdi to the encore, an high energy toast to champagne, the audience was treated to wonderful combination of humour, education, participation (the crowd was invited to choose from a selection of pieces in the second half, and even had a sing along), and above all, musical excellence.

Of course this sort of thing can only work, and did, if the performers are of an high enough calibre. The music was delivered beautifully and with respect to the art (with some of the antics on stage, perhaps even more faithfully to the original intent), and it should be respected as the training required to be any good is extremely demanding. At the risk of following the cliché, the stand out for me was Frederik. Not simply because he's a tenor but because he's a 'true tenor', a rare voice. When most men are forcing their voices far above a healthy range to suit the trends, to hear a natural tenor soar with dynamic and tonal control such as that is a treat. At the end of "I'll Know" from Guys and Dolls, Robert and Barbara hit a high unison note that just sat perfectly to end the first half. But while Robert was the standout for me, there really wasn't much in it between them, all voices filling the theatre unamplified, and yes, we could understand the words! (I should mention that at the finale of the encore Robyn showed why sopranos rule the stage as she landed on a note that easily overpowered the other 3 voices and the piano. Wow!)

One person whom I must praise (yes, I'm a pianist, I'm a bit biased) is Tina Chang. The job of an accompanist is not an easy one, indeed it is a special talent in its own right, requiring the ability to learn not only multiple styles of music but multiple styles of singers. Each voice will phrase his and/or her own way, perhaps change pacing as a mood changes, and at no point did Tina Chang stumble or did I get the feeling she was leading the singers. A pianist such as she is to be treasured by those with whom she works.

As a person who's no expert in opera but who understands and respects the art, I enjoyed the performance by QuintEssence. Purists may debate some of the finer points of what they presented, but purists always will. What QuintEssence delivered was a fun and very listenable introduction to how good opera can be and I've no doubt that there are some who will seek out full productions to attend in the future as a result.

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