

Ben Heppner

Heppner takes Kelowna by storm

Before proceeding with this review, I'd like to congratulate and thank Yvonne Topf and her Kelowna Community Concert Association for bringing Mr. Heppner to the Valley. It was a great idea, thrillingly realized.

Heppner began with a set of folk songs arranged by Benjamin Britten. Britten is rather far down on my list of favourite composers, but I was delighted to find that he had left the melodies of these songs intact and that the tonal accompaniments were full of tongue-in-cheek humour.

Heppner's good taste, lovely voice, and excellent diction got the program off to a good start. He used no microphone but none was needed; in fact, a lady in row F would have liked to move further back in the auditorium, complaining that Big Ben's voice was too loud for her.

The second set of songs showcased the tenor's phrasing and breath control. The first two selections were by Tchaikovsky, and my wife, a Croat, assures me that their interpretations were genuinely Slavic in nuance and style.

Then came a pair of songs by Sibelius (a Finn) with texts in Swedish and another pair by Grieg (a Norwegian) with texts in German. In each language, Heppner's enunciation was superior.

Craig Rutenberg at the piano shunned the spotlight, all the while providing Heppner with warm and flowing support--the mark of a great accompanist.

After the break, Heppner sang Winterstürme from the first act of Die Walküre and Come un bel dì di maggio from the last act of Andrea Chenier. The emotional tension built throughout this set and exploded with a chorus of bravos at the conclusion of Puccini's famous Nessun dorma.

The last set--parlour songs--included the Serenade from Sigmund Romberg's Student Prince and Be My Love by Nicholas Brodsky. An expert might have noticed that Heppner's voice was getting tired and that catarrh was building up in his throat. Still the great man, with sheer determination and an abundance of control, brought the concert to a successful close with hardly a bobble.

Graciously responding to the crowd's standing ovation, Heppner returned for one encore: Paulo Tosti's magnificent L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra. Never mind that the over-stressed voice finally gave out on the penultimate note. For me, this gutsy performance made the concert perfect.