

Review: Youngstown Symphony's Mozart and "City Lights" (March 21)

by Robert Rollin



Last Saturday evening, March 21, the Youngstown Symphony presented the second program of its Powers Auditorium classical series, *City Lights*, an interesting concert intermingling Mozart and film music by Charlie Chaplin. Conductor Randall Craig Fleisher gave a short prelude, astutely pointing out that both Mozart and Chaplin shared an ability to include humor, while at the same time imbuing their outputs with pathos.

Mozart's contribution was the *Symphony No. 38 in D Major*, K. 504, "The Prague," so named because of its premiere in that city shortly after the composer attended a performance of the opera *The Marriage of Figaro*. Mozart himself attended the *Symphony No. 38* premiere and even contributed three piano improvisations to the concert, one of which was on the famous *Non più andrai*, from *Figaro's* first act. Some themes in *Symphony No. 38* even suggest elements from *Figaro* and Mozart's next opera, *Don Giovanni*.

The Italian *Sinfonia* tradition exerted strong influence in Bohemia, and this is probably why Mozart omitted the minuet movement that is common in German-speaking countries. He chose paired flutes, oboes, bassoons, French horns and trumpets to coincide with Italian music tendencies and to give the piece a special lightness and charm.

The Youngstown Symphony performance of "The Prague" was excellent, the strings, woodwinds, brasses and timpani graceful and elegant. One commentator likens the opening passage of the first movement's Adagio section "to the figure used for the stone guest's heavy footsteps in the second finale of the opera *Don Giovanni*." The Allegro, starting thereafter, contains a wealth of ideas worthy of Mozart's best symphonic movements in sonata form. The first theme reappears in the dominant key as a foil to the multiplicity, helping to lend a sense of unity. The second theme shifts to the parallel

minor key to provide some pathos. The repeated exposition helps provide formal balance. The development's beautiful counterpoint elides nicely into the recapitulation. The performers played with graceful and refined restraint. The bassoons were especially charming in their soli roles.

The second movement, *Andante*, in a tastefully moderate six-eight meter, highlights a lovely violin section opening, an ingratiating oboe solo, a pair of sensuous solo flutes, and powerfully contrasting tutti passages that add the brass.

The *Presto* again features paired woodwinds and brass, as well as a repeated exposition. Its second theme boasts a wonderfully bouncy passage for bassoons. The movement develops two motives from this theme, leading to a recapitulation that stimulatingly continues to develop. The YSO captured all of these facets, giving a skillfully engaging performance.

After intermission the Symphony screened Charlie Chaplin's 1931 silent movie *City Lights* and performed Robert Johnson's score, which calls for a medium-sized orchestra augmented by three saxophones, guitar, piano, harp and sound effects. Talkies had virtually taken over the industry by 1931, but Chaplin steadfastly refused to depart from the silent medium. His trademark tramp was not easily converted to the spoken word.

The plot of *City Lights* hinges on a tramp's chance meeting with a beautiful blind girl selling flowers to make a living. The tramp, Chaplin's most beloved character, has repeated run-ins with a mercurial drunken millionaire, who gives him money and later throws him out several times. The tramp gives money he has earned as a street sweeper and boxer to the young blind girl after he hears about a special new surgical procedure to cure blindness. While at the millionaire's house he foils a robbery attempt, but is blamed and sent to jail. When the justice system finally releases him, he returns to find the blind girl cured and reunites with her.

The Tin Pan Alley-style score features several musical quotations, including the leitmotif for the blind flower girl. Chaplin lost a lawsuit to Spanish composer José Padilla for not crediting him for the melody.

The YSO's performance was exceptional. Their coordination with the film was so deft that it was easy to forget how challenging it is. Among the interesting moments were the tramp's swallowing of a whistle and interconnected slapstick events; a lovely oboe solo the first time he returns to the blind girl; the use of a solo string quartet to create pathos; and the sensitive music played as the blind girl touches the tramp's hands, recognizing him.

As a poignant close, the Youngstown Symphony performed the instrumental from Chaplin's score to *Modern Times* (1936) that later became the song we know as *Smile*, first recorded by Nat King Cole in 1954. That Chaplin was the composer is all the more impressive when one realizes that he didn't have formal music training and sang his compositions to the musicians, who wrote them down.

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