

TCO at Blossom: *The Little Mermaid* (Aug. 4)

by David Kulma



It was another enjoyable movie night at Blossom Music Center with The Cleveland Orchestra on Saturday, August 4. On offer was *The Little Mermaid* (1989) — a film which had kicked off the rebirth of Disney animated musicals through the '90s. Conducted by Sarah Hicks to sync with five gigantic screens and a

packed lawn full of families, The Cleveland Orchestra brought Alan Menken's magical music to life.

Written and directed by John Musker and Ron Clements, *The Little Mermaid* tells the story of Ariel, a mermaid princess who wants to explore the human world above the waves. She then sprouts legs with the help of the sea witch Ursula in order to win the human Prince Eric's love. Based on Hans Christian Andersen's 1837 fairy tale, this version leaves out the dark, the pious, and the schoolmarmish. Andersen had the mermaid go through horrible travails to win an immortal soul through love. In the hands of Disney, Andersen's goal of morally educating children to behave becomes a fully modern American celebration of seeking out new horizons and forging into the future.

Story aside, the main joy of the film is, of course, the blockbuster songs. Menken and lyricist Howard Ashman — who had previously teamed up for the comedy-horror musical *Little Shop of Horrors* — gave these songs Broadway structures: hugely memorable tunes intermixed with dialogue breaks that advance the story. Ariel's only song, "Part of Your World," undergirds her yearning for the world above. The crab

adviser to King Triton, Sebastian sings “Under the Sea” to show how the merkingdom celebrates itself as complete and unneeding of the outside world, while his “Kiss the Girl” looks to goad Eric to seal Ariel into the human world. Ursula’s “Poor Unfortunate Souls” explains the process of her magic and leads directly into the transformation scene. And the French chef Louis’s humorous waltz, “Les Poissons,” is full of silly French stereotypes, including Jacques Offenbach’s famous can-can as the chef fails to turn Sebastian into dinner.

The most fascinating part of these welcome play-a-long film concerts is the opportunity to focus on the elaborately wonderful and gorgeous score as played by The Cleveland Orchestra. Hicks led with great skill through all the twists and turns, staying well-synced with the film.

Using the time-honored leitmotif method, Menken regularly connects the tissues of the music to the action, referring both backward and forward. After the opening sequence that sets up the human world on Eric’s ship, we follow a fish down to the lively sea world — accompanied by a snippet of Ariel’s “Part of Your World.”

A nice touch was the intermission inserted after Ariel’s transformation. Hicks and the Orchestra sounded glorious in the short, added entr’acte that led back into the film. A large portion of the audience stuck around after the action was over to hear TCO play joyously under the credits.

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