

Steven Ball Concert Review

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Review written by Mark Dresden

Steven Ball is not your everyday run of the mill theater organist. He has a masters degree in musical performance. He is a carillonneur, a campanologist and a professor. He has obviously made quite a study of the American Theater Organ -- the mechanics, the aesthetics, the traditions, the purpose and the history as well as the art of accompanying silent films. Much of this, perhaps in more detail than needed for the Dickinson audience, was covered in his many homilies from the bench. While I for one have never felt how much the organ weighed in number of tons of particular interest unless you were planning to ship it somewhere, others may find this technical specificity of interest. Even so, it might be better to impart technical and historical information about the organ in writing, rather from the bench at a concert. Still, his genuine enthusiasm for the theater organ, and the Dickinson Kimball in particular was infectious and not lost on the Dickinson audience.

His program included material from Broadway musicals, from films and TV along with three classical pieces. It also included a Buster Keaton silent film, "The Week," which he did a splendid job of accompanying. I have a feeling the program was carefully selected in a pedantic way to demonstrate some of Steven's beliefs about the theater organ: that it is suitable to perform all kinds of music, old pieces, modern pieces, popular pieces as well a classical pieces, and that the organ was designed to replicate the orchestra. As such, many of his medleys seemed to resemble carefully

thought out orchestral suites based on thematic material from shows and movies, some of quite recent origin. His program was interesting and well played though in some respects a bit different from what we usually experience.

To open his program. Steven appeared in white tie and tails to present the overture from the 1956 operetta “Candide” written by Leonard Bernstein. It was a great opening piece. It was fresh, exciting, well played and a wonderful piece of music. While the operetta itself was not successful at it’s premier, the music has become immensely popular and the Overture is now one of the most frequently performed orchestral compositions by a 20th century composer. Steven’s arrangement was orchestral and did a good job of demonstrating how well the organ was suited to replicate the orchestra,

The opening was followed by a song named “I Want To Go Back To Michigan.” It was a cute, bouncy Irving Berlin song written for vaudeville in 1914. This was followed by a 5 song medley from Rogers and Hammerstein’s musical “Carousel.” This medley of beautiful tunes was well played and nicely arranged almost as if it were an orchestral suite using the tunes as themes.

From Broadway, the program moved to the 19th century with “Fanfare” written around 1850 by Jacques-Nicolas Lemmons. This, somewhat more challenging work, was nicely played and did a wonderful job of demonstrating the vast tonal resources and diversity of the Dickinson Kimball.

“Fanfare” was followed by another medley organized along the lines of an orchestral suite consisting of a selection of less than memorable tunes from the film “Seven Brides for Seven Brothers.” This was followed by a tune from the 1958 musical comedy “Aladdin” titled “No Wonder Taxes are too High.” It was a pleasant enough tune though again not particularly memorable. It was written by Cole Porter and in some circles considered sort of a last hurrah for the composer.

To end the first half of the program Steven chose Rimsky -Korsakov’s “Scheherazade” written in 1888. His arrangement and presentation was dazzling and filled with many colorful and beautiful solo voices. Judging from the applause that followed, it was very well received by the audience.

To start the second half of the program, Steven selected Richard Whiting’s “Beyond the Blue Horizon” written in 1944 for the film “Follow the Boys.” His arrangement was quite formal, maybe even a bit stiff, as if it were arranged as an orchestral offering. Following this opening, the program went right into the silent film – “One Week” produced by, and starring Buster Keaton. The film was fun and Steven did a super job accompanying it and the audience gave him a great big round of applause.

Following the film, Steven presented a lush, lyrical arrangement of “Over the Rainbow” from the 1939 film starring Judy Garland, the “Wizard of Oz.” This was followed by another orchestral medley of not, in my opinion, particularly memorable tunes from the recent (2003) Broadway musical “Wicked.” This set ended, as did several others, with a great big grand ending.

To complete his program, Steven returned to music written by Richard Whiting for a big, bold, brash, loud rendition of “Hooray for Hollywood,” the 1937 song written for the film “Hollywood Hotel” and which has become something of a national anthem for the film industry.

After considerable applause he returned to the console for a well arranged and well played encore of Gioachino Rossini’s “William Tell Overture for which the audience gave him a standing ovation.

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