

Simon Gledhill Concert Review

13 March 2010

Review written by Mark Dresden

Simon Gledhill's concerts have long been favorites with Dickinson audiences and this concert, his fifth, was no exception.

His program consisted of a variety of pieces, mostly familiar and mostly on the lighter side making for easy listening. While the pieces were familiar, the program was still fresh and interesting as most of his offerings have not previously been played to death on the concert circuit. There were songs from Broadway musicals, popular songs from the 30s and 40s, marches, dances, and orchestral pieces from the genre British light music (as might be expected in view of the nationality of our performer.) This program and these selections were perfect for a theater organ concert on the Dickinson Kimball and for the Dickinson audience.

Simon is a very talented organist and a polished performer. His arrangements and his registrations were musically appropriate, fresh and interesting. His playing, while seemingly effortless, was accurate and exciting. He was very much at home with the Dickinson Kimball, and he seemed to enjoy the many and vast tonal resources at his beck and call mindful, however, that these resources require restraint. It's always tempting with the Kimball to just let 'er rip with some of the big brassy reeds and pedal stops. Simon finds places for these voices in his program but they are used with discretion. On the other end of the tonal spectrum, he

rivets our attention by using some of the softest and very tiniest of voices to create stunningly beautiful passages.

Simon opened his program with a peppy arrangement of “Come Fly with Me,” a 1957 song written by Jimmy Van Heusen and made popular by Frank Sinatra. It featured reeds and the vibra harp and modulations which seemed to conjure up the idea of flight. While in flight, we headed to the islands to hear “Caribbean Dance,” a piece of “Light Music” written in 1959 by the British composer Madeline Dring featuring a Calypso rhythm. This was followed by a Medley of 11 tunes from the 1977 Broadway musical “Annie” which, judging from the applause, was well liked by the audience.

And then there was more British light music. This time with a piece titled “Rotten Row” which was written in 1960 by Walter Stott who, with aid of some surgery, became Angela Morgan in 1972. Rotten Row is the name of an actual place in London’s Hyde Park where for over 300 years ladies and gentlemen have come to ride their horses. Simon’s rendition did a good job of conjuring up clip-clopping and trotting along.

Next we are transported to the USA for a bit of nostalgia with the beautiful “Moonlight in Vermont,” a song written in 1943 by John Blackburn and Karl Suessdorf. In his arrangement Simon cleverly used the opening bars of Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” as an introduction before transitioning into the strains of “Moonlight in Vermont.” The registrations for this piece featured the lush voices of the strings and voxes, beautiful solo voices and a hushed ending using just the harp. A medley of four Hoagie Carmichael tunes from the 30s and on into the early 50s followed. Then to

end the first half of the program, Simon played a rousing rendition of Max Steiner's "King Kong March" written in 1933 for the movie of the same name. It was a terrific arrangement featuring an upbeat tempo, counter melodies, many key modulations, some big full ensemble registrations as well as some very nice solo voices passages.

The second half of the program opened with an upbeat rendition of "Up, Up and Away," a tune written in 1967 by Jimmy Layne Webb for the popular vocal group The 5th Dimension. It contained some nice jazz riffs and interesting modulations. This was followed by a hauntingly beautiful rendition of the song "Nature Boy" written in 1947 by Eden Ahbez and made famous in that year by Nat King Cole. The arrangement was interesting as Simon juxtaposed a Chopin theme revealing harmonic similarities.

Next on the program Simon presented a medley of 10 tunes, all familiar and all by the prolific composer of popular tunes Richard Whiting. These tunes were mostly from the 20s and 30s and they ranged from slow ballads to bouncy upbeat tunes including songs such as "My Ideal", "Louise," "Hooray For Hollywood," and "Beyond The Blue Horizon" to name but a few. Simon is masterful at combining songs into medleys and once again he did a splendid job of weaving these tunes into a cohesive medley with a variety of interesting rhythms, tempos, tonalities, modulations and smooth transitions from one tune to the next. This segment was not only nice to listen to but also instructive as to just how prolific the composer was.

This was followed by a lively orchestral piece aptly named “Melody on the Move.” This was another example of light music and it was written in the 40s by the British composer Clive Richardson. Simon’s arrangement was bright, breezy and fun to listen to. This was followed by an absolutely beautiful slow and dreamy arrangement of Steven Foster’s “I Dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair.” This piece opened using the lush flute celestas and voxes and then the oboe taking the melody line and finally finishing with a very soft and tiny 4’ flute. This arrangement epitomizes how Simon so skillfully makes less into more with his registrations and phrasings; and how he is able to make old (written in 1854) seem stunningly new and poignant. In case you haven’t guessed, I rather liked this offering.

Then on the theory, no theater organ concert would be complete without Cole Porter, Simon presented a terrific medley of 11 tunes from the 1948 Broadway musical “Kiss Me Kate.” His arrangements almost made you think you were listening to a live pit orchestra rather than a pipe organ -- super arrangements, registrations and smooth transitions from song to song.

To end his program Simon chose Franz von Suppe’s lively, galloping “Light Cavalry Overture” written in 1866 for von Suppe’s operetta by the same name. The piece offered catchy rhythms, and frequent changes of style starting with a majestic trumpet fanfare and ending with a reprise of the galloping cavalry theme. It was beautifully played and registered and at the conclusion, Simon was rewarded with a thunderous applause and a standing ovation demanding an encore.

For his encore he played a very jazzy rendition of “Can’t Buy Me Love,” a Beatles tune written by Paul McCartney and John Lennon and first recorded in Paris in 1964. At the end the audience was again on their feet for a second standing ovation. It would seem the Dickinson audience likes Simon and his music.

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