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TANGLEWOOD REVIEW

A Puckish Bit of Mischief by Moonlight

By JAMES R. OESTREICH

L ENOX, Mass., Aug. 1 — Tanglewood lore runs deep: as deep as the freshets during a summer storm in the Berkshires. Again this year, the program book for the Boston Symphony's festival here shows a photo of gussied-up concertgoers slipping and sliding in now famous mud, with the caption "After the storm of Aug. 12, 1937, which precipitated a fund-raising drive for the construction of the Tanglewood Shed."

Now the mud, er, lore runs even deeper. On Sunday the festival celebrated the 10th anniversary of another concert structure, the magnificent 1,200-seat Seiji Ozawa Hall, with a gala concert, and as John Oliver conducted the mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe and the Tanglewood Festival Chorus in Copland's creation riff, "In the Beginning," biblical rains did fall.

The many charms of Ozawa Hall include close and usually welcome contact with beautiful natural surroundings through windows above the stage and on the sides and a back wall that opens to a soft green hill. On this most unpromising evening, some 1,600 picnickers gathered on the lawn, already sopping, and were inundated and quite possibly terrified, but most remained stalwart.

Matters were better inside, though not unproblematic there either. Another of the hall's charms is superb acoustics, with the back open or closed: a remarkable feat. Yet even the best acoustics avail little over the sounds of pelting rain and cracking thunder. Beginning Wagner's "Siegfried Idyll," the strings of the Boston Symphony Chamber Players could scarcely be heard.

The most riveting moments came when Yundi Li, a spectacularly gifted young Chinese pianist, played works of Chopin and Liszt in a darkened auditorium with lightning flashing through the windows, rain pounding behind and thunder all around. In Liszt's "Campanella" especially (that composer's personality being what it was), the image of mad genius seemed irresistible.

Through it all, the program retained its dignity. Mr. Ozawa made his first Tanglewood appearance this summer, conducting the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra in wonderfully committed performances of Takemitsu's "Ceremonial: An Autumn Ode" and Verdi's "Forza del Destino" Overture.

The fellows of the music center, the festival's educational arm, were central to the weekend, appearing also in a production of Britten's opera "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in the Tanglewood Theater on Saturday afternoon (the second performance). Britten opera, too, figures prominently in Tanglewood lore, since the festival gave the American premiere of "Peter Grimes" in 1946. Here, as in the orchestral performances, the superb level of accomplishment among this year's fellows was soon apparent.

Britten's reduction of Shakespeare's "Midsummer Night's Dream" (from 1960), retains the fancy of the original and adds zany touches, including a parody mad scene. The staging, directed by David Kneuss and set in the 20th century, took the farce and ran with it. The rustic play-actors included takeoffs on W. C. Fields and Harpo Marx.

Stefan Asbury conducted an able and sometimes superior cast. Anne-Carolyn Bird, as Tytania, and Charles Temkey, as Bottom, played their love scene to the hilarious hilt.

On Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon the Boston Symphony took over, as usual, in the Shed. In a Puck-ish bit of mischief, Christoph von Dohnanyi and the orchestra opened their Saturday concert with Alfred Schnittke's "(K)ein Sommernachtstraum," or "(Not) a Summer Night's Dream." This Ivesian piece purposefully tortures a little Mozartean ditty, viewing it through various magnifying and distorting lenses to stretch the ears and the imagination.

In a further "Midsummer Night's Dream" allusion perhaps, that program also included Mendelssohn: not his incidental music to the play but his equally sprightly Violin Concerto. Renaud Capuçon, the young French soloist, played beautifully, though without great personality.

Especially in the bristling outer movements, his performance was fresh and crisp: notably so, given the withering humidity of this hot, clammy evening. (Schnittke, with his musical nightmare, may in fact have captured the essence of these unlovely summer nights better than either Mendelssohn or Britten.)

Mr. Dohnanyi, the dominant force in the concerto, also led a muscular yet sensitive performance of Brahms's Fourth Symphony.

John Williams, the film composer, conducted the orchestra's Sunday concert, which was largely devoted to his music, in celebration of his 25-year association with the orchestra. (He conducted the Boston Pops Orchestra from 1980 to 1993.)

The Williams works included excerpts from his score for "The Unfinished Journey," a 1999 film by Steven Spielberg; "Soundings," written for the opening of Disney Hall in Los Angeles last year; and the Horn Concerto, also from 2003, deftly performed by the orchestra's principal horn player, James Sommerville.

Mr. Williams, as every film buff knows, can transport listeners to wondrous sonic realms. But in his nonfilm music, when he is not closely tracking a scenario, the progress sometimes seems arbitrary. Still, this was all pleasant enough.

Copland's "Eight Poems of Emily Dickinson" filled out the program, with the soprano Dawn Upshaw as soloist. Ms. Upshaw is coming off vocal problems, and this music tested her range of pitch and tone in only a limited way. She did manage superbly spun sustained notes.

If she was occasionally drowned out, it was by the orchestra, at least, not the heavens.