**Review: Cambridge Philharmonic Orchestra & Chorus perform ‘Bernstein on Broadway’ at West Road Concert Hall on Saturday, 8 December 2018**

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It’s impossible that anything in Cambridge at the weekend could have surpassed the performing talents on display at West Road Concert Hall on Saturday night, where the Cambridge Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by Tim Redmond, presented ‘Bernstein on Broadway’ and celebrated the centenary of the composer’s birth. It was an electrifying evening from beginning to end.

Joining the orchestra for music from ‘On the Town’, the ‘Choral Suite’ from ‘West Side Story’ and a concert performance of ‘Wonderful Town’ was a uniformly brilliant and distinguished cast of soloists whose combined talents allowed us to see that Bernstein is as much associated with the identity of America, and of New York in particular, as for example Verdi is with Italy’s.

Everything there is to say about ’10 gifts too many’ Leonard Bernstein has probably already been said, but with such an amount of exhilarating musical power inside him, it’s no wonder that, when conducting, both his feet would sometimes altogether take leave of the podium in the so-called ‘Lenny’s leaps’ he was famous for. You could feel that energy as Nigel Richards (who had once actually worked with Bernstein), Owain Browne and Seán Boylan launched exhilaratingly into ‘New York, New York’, a terrific number, known probably to most of us from the musical’s film version.

Like the city of its subject, Bernstein’s music has edge and unruliness, powerful rhythm and a degree of shrillness, reflected in Gabey’s and Ozzie’s lyrics: ‘We’ve got one day here and not another minute….We’ll find the romance and danger waiting in it.’

The thematic heart is the beautiful ‘Lonely Town’ which British-Australian tenor Adrian Dwyer sang to perfection. And it would not be to take away from his performance to mention in passing Frank Sinatra’s wonderful version of it, too. (Watch him perform it live in 1960 on You Tube).

‘On the Town’ (1945) was about war-time America. The next music we heard, though, is timeless in the same way that its Shakespeare source is. And just listening to this masterpiece again it is clear that ‘West Side Story’ has lost none of its power to move. Many of its songs have become classic numbers in their own right, and now joining the assembled cast for the Choral Suite from the musical were Emily Apps and Sara Lynam, as sparkling and talented a duo as one could ever imagine.

Emily paired up with Seán Boylan in ‘Tonight’ and with Sara for a lively ‘America’. Yes, the music is amazing, but Stephen Sondheim’s lyrics are equally inspired – in Adrian Dwyer’s lovely ‘Maria’ come couplets such as, ‘Say it loud and there’s music playing…Say it soft and it’s almost like praying.’ CPO’s Chorus, too, must take much credit in this, as indeed throughout the whole concert. Their ‘One Hand One Heart’, for example, brought tears to the eyes.

After the interval was ‘Wonderful Town’. And this truly was a wonderful performance of a musical these days infrequently seen. It was clear that the whole stage company was enjoying itself enormously. Emily and Sara (Eileen and Ruth respectively) harmonized ‘Why, oh why, oh why O . . . Why did we leave Ohio?’ – marking them out as precursors of the innocents in New York with which we are familiar from Salinger’s Holden Caulfield to ‘Crocodile Dundee’.

Aidan Smith’s comedic ‘Pass the Football’ was excellently done, but one tour de force after another came from the amazingly versatile Sara Lynam in ‘One Hundred Easy Ways to Lose a Man’, ‘Conga’ and ‘Swing’. ‘The Wrong-Note Rag’ with the equally charismatic Emily Apps was just a triumph.

The thematic heart of the work is when Baker (Nigel Richards) who had already beautifully sung ‘A Quiet Girl’ finds his true love in Ruth and with the whole company sings the well-known ‘It’s Love’.

Cue for a reprise of the ‘Conga’ sequence, Sara Lynam to oblige, but this time with the cast lining up to take their conga through the concert hall with the less inhibited members of the packed house joining in.

It was a literal show-stopping event, full of joy and high spirits from which the audience left on a ‘high’ of admiration for the whole evening’s experience. Congratulations to Tim Redmond, and Paula Muldoon, leader of the fabulous Cambridge Philharmonic which unflaggingly embodied the very essence of Bernstein’s music throughout.

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