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February 27, 2005

Collaborators make Mahler and Prokofiev sing

By Peter Bergquist
For The Register-Guard

The Eugene Symphony's concert Thursday, led by Giancarlo Guerrero, featured the cantata drawn by Sergey Prokofiev from his score for Sergei Eisenstein's film, "Alexander Nevsky."

Mezzo-soprano Milagro Vargas and the Symphony Chorus, directed by Sharon Paul, took part in this piece. Vargas also was the soloist in five songs by Gustav Mahler, drawn from poems by Friedrich Rückert.

The program began with a performance of "Morningside Run" by Philip Rothman. Rothman is the "Music Alive" composer-in-residence with the symphony under a program sponsored by the American Symphony Orchestra League.

"Morningside Run" was inspired by Rothman's early morning runs along Riverside Drive in Manhattan. His route takes him through the upper West Side to Morningside Heights.

New York is a busy place, and the music is appropriately busy. It moves along at a good clip with lots of rhythmic energy and complexity. Rothman must run fast! I found the piece highly entertaining and enjoyable, especially as a former runner and New Yorker. Guerrero led a vigorous performance, and the orchestra responded with enthusiasm and precision.

Mahler's Rückert songs are mostly scored for small orchestra. He

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composed them in 1901, when he also was working on his Fifth Symphony. Some of them echo that piece, as well as look ahead to the intimate language of his later music.

Vargas gave a splendid performance of these songs. Her rich voice was highly expressive, both when the music was quiet and at the few times when everything opened out -such as in "Um Mitternacht (Around Midnight)," which is scored for only wind instruments, timpani and harp. She soared above the brass section at the end of the song after conversing quietly with the woodwinds at the beginning.

The other four songs were mostly quiet, and in them Vargas sang as with a chamber ensemble, always with a resonant, controlled tone. This is some of Mahler's most personal music, and Vargas gave practically an ideal performance.

Guerrero and the orchestra provided her with sympathetic accompaniments, though their parts were far from mere background. The instruments were in constant dialogue with the voice, and the playing was very much on a par with the soloist - a wonderful collaboration.

Alexander Nevsky was a 13th century Russian prince who repelled Western invaders from the motherland. It was a very topical subject in the Soviet Union in 1938, as concern mounted about the Nazis. Josef Stalin had Eisenstein make the film for propaganda purposes, and Eisenstein enlisted Prokofiev to write the score.

Whatever its origins, the film was an artistic success. Prokofiev extracted some of its best music for the cantata; it survives as a concert piece.

The chorus is an integral part of the music, taking a leading role in five of its seven movements. After an orchestral prelude, it sings about Nevsky, then depicts the Western invaders through a pseudo-chant in garbled Latin. In the fourth movement, the Russian people rise up, and a hair-raising battle on the ice follows.

In it, the songs of the invaders and defenders sound out, with the invaders gradually dying away in defeat. A solo laments the fallen Russians, and a final chorus celebrates Nevsky's victory.

The Symphony Chorus was in fine form for this performance, singing precisely and with enthusiasm. It coped equally well with the Russian texts and the occasional Latin. Once again, the singers proved a valuable adjunct to the orchestra, and Paul deserves praise for training them so well.

In the lament in the sixth movement, Vargas sang every bit as beautifully as in the Mahler songs. Guerrero and the orchestra played the complex music very well indeed.

Prokofiev always is a challenge for an orchestra, and the players negotiated the difficult score with great success. Guerrero led another of his well-paced, energetic and expressive performances.

It was in every way a highly successful evening.

Peter Bergquist is a professor emeritus at the University of Oregon

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