

I Musici de Montréal

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I Musici de Montreal © Copyright 2008 Arizona Daily Wildcat Posted: 3/27/08 By: Laura Hawkins

If one thing can be said about the members of I Musici de Montreal, it's that they certainly don't have their work cut out for them. With more than 100 concerts per year and only a handful of string orchestra works from which to choose, innovation is a word the Canadian chamber ensemble knows well.

Oh, they're crowd-pleasers, to be sure. The first half of the program featured Tchaikovsky masterpiece "Serenade for Strings," following a lesser-known Shostakovich piece, "Prelude and Scherzo."

The 15-piece I Musici, led by conductor/arranger/cellist Yuri Turovsky, is a sonic powerhouse. Even among the world's most elite performing groups, their dynamic range is remarkable. They switch from fortissimo to triple-pianissimo in a single beat, and at all volumes the sound completely envelops the auditorium. One could close one's eyes during the "Serenade" and see images of Romantic-era Russia.

Then came the second half: Turovsky's own arrangement of Modest Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" (originally written for solo piano and later transcribed by Maurice Ravel for symphony orchestra), with accompanying paintings by Natasha Turovsky projected on a screen behind the orchestra. Rather than displaying still pictures, however, digital artist Gaël Hollard animated them to correspond with the music. Needless to say, no eyes were closed during that part of the performance.

Turovsky calls the genre "choreographed paintings." One might also call it brilliant. Mussorgsky's work is a series of vignettes (inspired by the paintings of a close friend and prominent St. Petersburg artist) ranging from atmospheric to frantic, and it lends itself perfectly to visuals.

Natasha's portraits rarely stray from the impressionistic and surreal. Her reinterpretations of Russian folk elements, which include a legendary witch's ride through the night sky ("Baba Yaga's Hut on Chicken Legs"), give the movements an added depth, resulting in a sort of "Fantasia" for grown-ups.

The nightmarish "Gnomus," rendered a deeply menacing gnome with gnarled wooden legs. In between fits of hobbling across the screen, an up-close shot of his face - through a somewhat Photoshop-like effect - warped itself each time the cellos and basses played their sinister theme.

"Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks" appeared more of a dance party than a ballet. Eggs with legs and sinister beaks cavorted around a gramophone, in their various stages of hatching. The whole display was positively absurd, and it was the first time I've ever heard a proper audience laugh in a music hall.

Amid all the novelty, the audience seemed to forget to raise an eyebrow at Turovsky's brave arrangement. I Musici generated a full sound for the originally brass-heavy "Promenade" and "Great Gate at Kiev" by playing the parts in unison. For the most part, nothing felt lacking. But even with the violin solo flawlessly executed in "Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle," there really is something irreplaceable about the tone of a muted trumpet.

If every orchestra made its music this accessible, there would be a lot more young people attending classical concerts. The Turovskys know they're onto something, too, as they're planning at least 10 more choreographed projects, including ones set to Tchaikovsky and Prokofiev. I, for one, can't wait.