0. The Omniscient Mussel

Review: Guy Few, Nadina Mackie Jackson @ The Elora Festival

Duo Affinité 19th July, 2008 St John's Anglican Church, Elora

If a bassoon and trumpet recital didn't qualify as my daily dose of bizzarerie, getting stuck behind a 1985 Lincoln limousine weaving down a country road at 65kph certainly did. The dodgy driving meant I had to leg it to the church but thankfully I only missed a few bars of the opening Paganini sonata. According to Guy Few and Nadina Mackie Jackson, he did write a piece specifically for trumpet and bassoon but it was more than a bit rubbish, so they decided to pillage his violin and guitar sonatas for suitable material.

To be truthful, this concert caught my eye purely for its novelty value but it wasn't too long into the show that my ear was caught by the instruments' rather complementary sonorities. In the three Paganini sonatas, Few played a corno instead than a regular trumpet. Looking rather like a baby French horn, the corno is made with a conical rather than cylindrical bore, which mellows out the sound to something resembling a euphonium. It is brilliant and agile in the upper register but more difficult in the lower, a weakness exposed in parts of the sonata set.

Beethoven's Seven Variations On A Theme From The Magic Flute was next on the program and had Few taking a seat at the piano to accompany Jackson. Variation sets based on popular tunes were wildly popular in the salons of early 19th century Europe and can quickly become tedious to modern ears. Beethoven was so good at it, he could have come up with 32 Variations on Last Night's Dinner Bill if he felt so inclined. Thankfully, in this case, he managed a modicum of restraint and ended the piece after a very pleasant seven transformations.

The piano in St John's has a tendency to sound quite percussive at full stick and although Jackson played with plenty of volume, there were several places where she simply couldn't compete.

To end the program, Few pulled out his party trick: playing trumpet and piano at the same time. The piece was a lickity-split Dance by Shostakovich arranged for trumpet, bassoon and piano. Jackson handled the bulk of the melodic material, playing faster than I thought possible for a bassoon, while Few piped with occasional trumpet licks, all the while accompanying on the piano.

This sense of fun is what made the concert entertaining and rendered irrelevant the fact that some of the pieces were not A-grade material. Duo Affinité have great chemistry on stage and take great pleasure in bending the boundary between show and concert. At the end, I was left with the impression that they could have been playing washtub bass and a pair of spoons and the afternoon would still have been a hoot.

Audience members who elected not to beat the traffic were rewarded with with a deliciously bawdy cabaret tune involving a bassoon and some "boom, boom, boom, boom."

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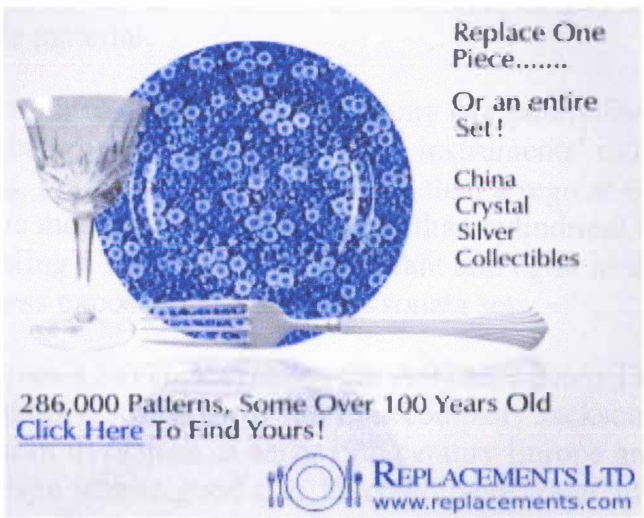

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