Lincoln orchestra, opera overcome Gershwin challenge

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Concert Review

The Lincoln Civic Orchestra played a challenging program of Gershwin works Sunday afternoon at the O'Donnell Auditorium.

The orchestra, under the direction of Herbert E. Dregalla, Jr., did a fine job both in accompanying the vocalists of the Lincoln Light Opera and in playing "Selections from Porgy and Bess" and "Rhapsody in Blue."

Members of the orchestra justifiably should be pleased with themselves, as they played this concert with style and grace. A few problems with ensemble pitch and balance took a while to clear up, especially in "Rhapsody," but overall the program went off without a hitch.

Playing a program of all George Gershwin works can be a problem, as the pieces are well known. Even though Gershwin has been dead since 1937, his work is alive, frequently heard on TV commercials and in movies. Gershwin is a good composer for a semi-professional orchestra to pick because his music is available, approachable and appealing.

Gershwin's music appeals to novices and critics alike because it is melodic and has clear jazz influences. The difficulty arises in reconciling the works' classical and jazz elements.

The civic orchestra shared the program with the Lincoln Light Opera, which presented some of George and Ira Gershwin's best short vocal works. Included in the vocal selections were the songs "Our Love is Here to Stay," "A Foggy Day" and "Embraceable You."

The show's four singers – Malley Keenan, James Schaffner, Kristi Olson-Heng and Joleen Kay Allyn – were excellent. Their songs could have sounded maudlin if handled improperly. This wasn't the case Sunday.

Malley Keenan, director of the Light Opera Company, sang "Our Love is Here to Stay" with accompaniment from his son, violinist Sean Keenan. Both Keenans showed excellent musicianship, with Malley Keenan making the most of the unusually downbeat lyrics.

Olson-Heng, a contralto, showed amazing stage presence on "Someone to Watch Over Me." Olson-Heng had great rapport with the crowd, which is rarely matched by professional singers with years of stage experience. She also had a tremendously rich voice and true pitch.

Schaffner, the baritone soloist, shared the stage with Allyn, a soprano, on "Embraceable You." Schaffner showed great diction and pitch, making the most of the melodic line. Allyn was fine as well, having a full-bodied sound that blended with Schaffner's. My only complaint is that both singers had to compete with the orchestra and each other to be heard.

Among the orchestral pieces played was the war horse "Rhapsody in Blue." This piece necessitates a