

ARTS ARENA BLOG

Minnesota Orchestra offers irresistible 'Night in the Tropics'

By Michael Anthony | Published Wed, May 27 2009 10:00 am

Historically, symphony orchestras have been awkward players in the swing department, whether it be jazz or rock. Remember that old album cover with an 80-year-old Arthur Fiedler trying to look funky in a Beatles wig and those stiff Boston Pops arrangements of “Can’t Buy Me Love” and “Day Tripper”? The barrier between classical and popular idioms never seemed higher.

So what made the Minnesota Orchestra’s venture into orchestral jazz, “Night in the Tropics,” at Orchestra Hall this past weekend such a success?

First of all, the man at the podium, Osmo Vanska, understands jazz rhythm. Check out his “Music!” CD on the BIS label, and you’ll hear all those Finns in the Lahti Symphony sound like they just spent a week on Duke Ellington’s tour bus. As he demonstrated again Saturday night, Vanska is also a first-rate clarinetist who loves playing klezmer, which is Jewish jazz of the Eastern-European variety.

Vanska’s collaborator was orchestra trumpeter Charles Lazarus, who conceived the program and wrote several of the evening’s numbers, including the irresistible “Dancing Gypsy,” a duet in klezmer style with

Lazarus and Vanska as soloists, the performance of which nearly raised the roof Saturday night. (It's featured on Lazarus's latest CD, "Zabava.") Lazarus also brought along his own expert rhythm section – pianist Tommy Barbarella, bassist Jeff Bailey, percussionist Shai Hayo and drummer Craig Hara, who wrote the smart Gil Evans-style arrangements of Lazarus' compositions, including the beguiling "Kilauea's Fountains," an evocation of the Hawaiian Islands vividly brought to life by the trumpeter's soaring, bright-toned solo playing.

Other highlights included "Dos Gardenias," an old-style romantic ballad by the Cuban composer Isolina Carillo (much in the idiom of "The Buena Vista Social Club") and, displaying Lazarus' fascination with the "lounge music" of the '50s, "Gopher Mambo," written for the "Inca Princess" with the five-octave range, Yma Sumac (rumored, some might recall, to be actually Amy Camus – the name spelled backwards – from Brooklyn. Will we ever know the truth?) Playing the tune with a piccolo trumpet, Lazarus hit high notes that even the "Inca Princess" would have admired.

This very special evening opened with Gershwin's "Cuban Overture" and closed with a delectable medley of ageless songs by Antonio Carlos Jobim, after which there was an exuberant encore, Vanska and Lazarus playing the "Zorba the Greek" theme, which had the audience on its feet clapping along.

There's a rumor going around that this hip, fun program might become an annual event at Orchestra Hall. Let's keep that rumor

afloat.