

Crowd thrills to Mozart rendered in Lebanese

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BEIRUT: It's a Friday night at St. Joseph's Church just off Monnot Street. The church is packed to the gunnels with folks who've come to listen to a bit of classical music, performed by the Lebanese National Symphony Orchestra (LNSO) under the baton of Harout Fazlian.

The opening piece is Haydn's piano concerto in D, arguably the strongest of his three keyboard concertos. The solo work is carried off with aplomb by 17-year-old Shaghig Babikian. Headlining is a performance of Mozart's rarely staged opera "Bastien and Bastienna," featuring Cynthia Samaha, Ziad Nehme and Father Toufic Maatouk. The first two performers are in the final year of their studies at the Lebanese National Conservatory. Maatouk is a recent graduate.

"Bastien and Bastienna" is one of Mozart's first operas – it seems he was 12 when he composed it. A singspiel, its arias are linked by spoken dialogue rather than sung recitatives. The LNSO performance is rare indeed, since the German libretto and dialogue have been translated into Lebanese Arabic by Henri Zoghaib, with Zoghaib and Fazlian making further adjustments to reconcile the translation to the score. Stage direction was shouldered by Berge Fazlian who, aside from being the director's father, has some years of experience with the Rahbani brothers' musicals.

It's a sweetly childlike work,

revolving around an episode in the romance of the titular shepherd and shepherdess.

Bastienna (Samaha) is feeling down because she fears another girl has caught the eye of her beloved Bastien (Nehme). Enter the (slightly roguish) village magician Colas (Maatouk), who assures her that Bastien is still loyal to her, just distracted. He advises her to pretend to shun the shepherd to teach him a lesson.

Bastien himself approaches then, and Colas informs him that Bastienna has a new love. The shepherd panics and begs the wizard's assistance. Colas obliges with a spell in the form of a nonsense aria that he promises will return Bastienna to his side. When the shepherdess returns to the stage, though, she insists she no longer loves him and indulges in a bit of playful chain-rattling.

It all turns out for the best, of course, in this case a trio performance praising Colas' prowess.

The story may be slight and childlike but the music is all Mozart, albeit a juvenile Mozart not yet at the height of his powers – and probably guided by his father Leopold, a respected composer in his own right. The Lebanese performers ham it up appropriately. Their relatively young voices – the oldest is 31 – do a commendable job, though (thanks to the church's challenging acoustics) they have some help from microphones. By the time it is over, audience members are beside themselves with admiration.

Mingling local dialect with the music of Mozart is guaranteed to be a popular combina-

tion – even the most alien music can become palatable when the lyrics are sung in a language audiences understand. It makes the Zoghaib-Fazlian version of "Bastien and Bastienna" ideal for holiday concerts. It also makes the little opera a perfect tool for instilling a sense of music appreciation in kids.

The Lebanese adaptation of the opera was Fazlian's initiative. A strong advocate of bringing opera to the people, the director agrees that pieces like "Bastien and Bastienna" have great pedagogical value. In this regard, he plans to mount the opera again in Beirut in the coming months and says the LNSO would like to take such works to the wider Arab world.

"Obviously it would be good to have some sort of national opera house in Beirut," observes Cynthia Zaven, a Beirut composer and pianist who was an accompanist during rehearsals. "So much time and effort go into preparing for a performance like this, it seems a waste to have [it] performed only once.

"Of course, there are so many other priorities in Lebanon right now – economic and political, and security matters," she says. "You've got to make a living and pay for your kids' schooling and put food on the table. It would be surreal to have a national opera in Beirut now. Or maybe it would fit perfectly with all the chaos in the country."

The **Lebanese National Symphony Orchestra** performs again tonight at St. Joseph's Church. For more information, please call +961 1 489 530