

New 'Pied Piper,' Wolff recital show there's life outside of Seattle

Music review

"THE PIED PIPER OF HAMELIN,"
new opera by Carol Sams, in Tacoma
Opera production; Pantages Theatre
of Tacoma, yesterday.

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DAVID WOLFF, pianist, in recital;
Everett Community Theatre, last Sat-
urday.

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One sure sign of a region's artistic health is a flourishing group of satellite arts groups in the communities surrounding the major population center. By these standards, the artistic health of the Pacific Northwest is excellent: This past weekend, the most interesting action was to be found in the theaters of Tacoma and Everett, rather than Seattle.

For months, the buzz about Tacoma Opera's upcoming premiere of a new "Pied Piper" opera by Seattle composer Carol Sams has suggested that something exceptional is in the works. This past weekend, when the opera was performed before nearly-full houses, those expectations came to fruition in a lively, witty and beautifully produced show.

Working from a libretto by Bruce Hurlbut, Sams has written a score that takes full advantage of the comic opportunities while throwing in a fugue or two, as well as some very challenging arias and ensembles. It's more reminiscent of musical comedy

than straight opera, with whiffs of Leonard Bernstein here and there, and fast-moving production values that suggest a bridge between Broadway and conventional opera.

Presiding over the orchestra is George Shangrow, who deserves full credit for pulling together a big cast, chorus, orchestra and supers through a difficult score.

Stage director David Bartholomew keeps the stage jam-packed with villagers, rats, children, principal singers, a dancer and an oompah band (three cheers for yodeler Hans Reiner). The costumes, designed by Catherine Meachum Hunt, are lovely, as are the storybook sets by Edie Whitsett.

The strong cast occasionally had trouble with the very high-lying vocal lines, which had many singers working at the top of their registers. Donald Collins was a standout in the title role, playing the piper as a sweet, misunderstood guy; fine work also was heard from Mira Frohnmayer, Gretchen Hewitt, Stephanie Klatsky, Dana Johnson, Randel Wagner, Robert McPherson and Paul Benningfield, among others.

Yesterday's audience was large and appreciative, obviously delighted with the show. Tacoma Opera has succeeded in artistic director Hans Wolf's goal: Set a familiar story to new music, to draw people in and give them a chance to like contemporary opera.

Wolff shows potential

Local music lovers have been

describing the young pianist David Wolff as an exceptional talent for some time now, and they are not mistaken: Last Saturday night's recital in the new Everett Community Theatre revealed an 18-year-old pianist of unusual dexterity and musicality.

Wolff's technique is very strong and secure, and he's obviously well-schooled; both factors should help significantly in the next few years, when he will attempt to launch his career with a medal from a major competition. That's going to require not just note-perfect performances, but also a unique vision of the music and a deep communication with the audience. Wolff plays beautifully, but he doesn't give much away.

The far-reaching program began with a highly impressive performance of Bach's Partita No. 2, in which the air of unruffled calm continued even through the thorny final movement. The Prokofiev Sonata No. 6 was very fine; Debussy's "Estampes" and a Chopin set were a bit more variable (the C-Sharp Minor Scherzo was the least convincing piece on the program), and the Rachmaninoff encore (the G-Sharp Minor Prelude) was back up to top form.

Wolff missed a lot of opportunities to connect with the audience by realizing the passion and the innate theatricality of some of the music. If he pulls his interpretive skills up to the level of his technical ones, he could have a first-rank career. It's going to be fascinating to watch his progress.