

National Chorus of Cuba

Cuban Choir Makes It Sound Easy

It was the National Choir of Cuba Monday night at the Kelowna Community Theatre, and I found myself wondering whether all the talk of defections was just a gimmick to publicize the concert. Why? Because one would be hard put to find a more balanced ensemble; and because all the soloists were first rate. (One would surely expect the soloists to defect before anyone else.)

This was not, as I expected, simply keeping a stiff upper lip in the wake of the defections; the remaining 27 voices of the coro nacional de Cuba seemed blissfully unaware of the loss of eleven of their comrades.

The sellout crowd at the Community Theatre gave the group a warm reception and would not let the choir go until the audience was finally granted three encores. At the start of the second section, Mayor Walter Gray welcomed the Cubans to Kelowna. He then reminded everyone that only Mexico and Canada maintained unbroken diplomatic relations with Cuba during the revolutionary period, and that about a million and a half Canadians vacation in Cuba every year.

An aura of ease and warmth surrounds the Cuban ensemble. Its conductor, Professor Digna Guerra, is unobtrusive and seems almost superfluous until one realizes that in her capable hands lies all the precision, all the momentum, and indeed all the sophistication of the chorus.

The first half of the program, which was largely international in scope, followed no particular chronological order, and, except for a piece by Claudio Monteverdi, featured relatively unknown composers. I was particularly taken with the Waltz for Debby by Evans and Lees, which the group jived into a two-beat variation for the reprise.

Although the program was sung entirely a cappella, special effects were abundant. For instance, both the men and the women switched in and out of aboriginal-sounding tones during the folk mass of Calixto Alvarez. In E. Rautavaara's Suite de Lanca, the siren effect of extended glissandi was punctuated by the extremely close harmonies of seconds and ninths.

The second half of the program was less formal than the first and decidedly Hispanic in flavour. Nevertheless, the second-part numbers that garnered the greatest ovation were not Spanish standards, but rather the traditional spiritual Steal Away Home and the Londonderry Air, better known as Danny Boy.

Steal-Away's soloist, Bismarck Estupiñán, carried the art of the descant into hitherto uncharted regions with his florid, impassioned ornamentation. Danny-Boy' soloist, the old looking but young sounding Jaime Ponsoda, delighted the concertgoers with his huge, rich tones.

Hats off to the Kelowna Concert Association, whose dedicated board of directors, executive, and volunteers have again scored a triumph by bringing this superb ensemble to our fair city.