

CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEW

Long and lovely horn steals show

By Valerie Scher
CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

Carlo Torlontano is a serious musician, an internationally respected virtuoso. So why did some audience members laugh when he made his entrance at Saturday's Mainly Mozart Festival concert?

It couldn't be helped. Even Torlontano smiled, as if accustomed to such a response.

That's because the 42-year-old Italian performer plays the alphorn, which has to be one of the oddest and most ungainly instruments ever

heard at downtown's Spreckels Theatre.

Once used to call cattle in the summer pastures of the Swiss mountains, it has more recently been featured in cough-drop commercials.

About 12 feet long, with a bell-like protuberance supported by a tiny stand, Torlon-

tano's valveless wooden horn tapered to a metal mouthpiece and looked like a prop that the Marx Brothers or Three Stooges would have relished. Yet the accomplished French horn player, who lives near Naples, is devoted to the alphorn, which he discovered about eight years ago on a trip to Switzerland.

"I want to take the instrument from folklore to the concert hall. That is very important to me. That is my mission," Torlontano said in the lobby before the performance, as concertgoers gaped at his 5-year-old, bamboo and pine instrument, which separates into three pieces for traveling.

Making their Mainly Mozart debuts, Torlontano and the alphorn were the stars of the "Sinfonia Pastorella" by Leopold Mozart, father of Wolfgang Amadeus. The 12-minute "Sinfonia" was the quirky highlight of Saturday's program (repeated yesterday at the California Center for the Arts, Escondido), which also included early symphonies by Franz Schubert and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart plus Mozart's Violin Concerto in A Major, K. 219, with the ever-elegant violinist William Preucil.

Though the alphorn will never equal the violin in popularity, Torlontano furthered his instrument's cause. Aply accompanied by conductor David Atherton and the orchestra, he articulated the hunting-hornlike calls that were echoed by the strings in the appealingly straightforward score.

His sound, graced by an attractive vibrato, was mellow yet penetrating. Despite his instrument's limited range — and the difficulty of playing without valves — Torlontano clearly conveyed the leaps, repeated notes and expressive changes in dynamics. Particularly impressive was the opening movement, where the alphorn achieved a grandeur that made one understand why such composers as Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss incorporated it into orchestra scores.

Yet Mainly Mozart's orchestra didn't need the alphorn to make a positive impact. Atherton emphasized the charming high spirits of Mozart's rarely-encountered Symphony in D Major, which was based on an overture Mozart wrote when he was just 16. Schubert was also 16 when he composed his Symphony No. 1, which inspired consistently fine playing, especially in the tight blend of winds and strings.

For artistic subtlety, however, nothing surpassed Preucil's interpretation of the Mozart violin concerto. Though the tone production wasn't always ideal in the brass, the solo violin trilled, throbbed, sang and soared, thanks to the expertise of the Cleveland Orchestra concertmaster who has long been a Mainly Mozart favorite.

Valerie Scher : (619) 293-1038;
valerie.scher@uniontrib.com