Short Takes: Moe's marvelous 'Tri-Stan' pokes fun at pop and high art

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Arts & Entertainment writers offer capsule comments on this, that and the other thing ...

Whoever decided classical music can't be funny and certainly shouldn't be entertaining would have been dismayed at the multitude of belly laughs Sunday night at Bellefield Hall Auditorium.

The chief instigator was a probing but comedic new work by Pitt composer Eric Moe. The world premiere of "Tri-Stan" was the highlight of a concert by visiting ensemble Sequitur, presented by Pitt's Music on the Edge series.

"Tri-Stan" is a setting for mezzo-soprano and chamber orchestra of a David Foster Wallace short story, "Tri-Stan: I Sold Sissee Nar to Ecko." In whimsical, fast-moving prose, Wallace pokes equal fun at pop culture's repeating of itself and high culture's lingering snobbishness, ultimately showing the two to be pretty darn similar.

The twisted plot, purposefully laden with furbelow academic terms, bad puns and mixed mythology, follows the tragic demise of a media mogul's (Agon M. Nar) actress daughter (Sissee), shot by a demented stalker (Ecko). A pithy synopsis does little justice to the double-entendres and slippery humor of its depiction of how Nar succeeded by recycling the same sitcom, from "Brady Bunch" to "Family Ties" to "The Cosby Show." Then there's the ridiculousness of sexy Sissee becoming the star of a cable hit, "Beach Blanket Endymion," even though all she does is sleep in every episode.

Faced with such an air-tight text, Moe's creation was a marvel. Influenced by composer David Del Tredici's vocal works, the structure of "Tri-Stan" aided the manic text immensely. Mary Nessinger excellently delivered the wordy recitatives and exquisite arias. Under Paul Hostetter, Sequitur oscillated between background ambience and foreground description with fluidity, seamlessly incorporating quotes ranging from TV show themes to Wagner. A wonderfully kitschy video prepared and played by CMU's Suzie Silver offered "ultra-titles" -- a mix of text and images.

The complete text was not there, however, something that should change in future concerts, because the piece sags when the words are not understood.

"Tri-Stan" is a major work for Moe, not just in size (50 minutes), but because it's a culmination of several strands of his compositional aesthetic. For an audience, it is one of those rare works that transcends the cultural divide while still being rooted in both sides. People of differing backgrounds can enjoy and, yes, be edified by its cautionary tale.

Roberto Sierra's buoyant "Cancionero Sefardi," sung engagingly by soprano Judith Kellock, and Harold Meltzer's monotonous "Exiles," sung that way by baritone Richard
Lalli, rounded out the program.

-- Review by Andrew Druckenbrod
Post-Gazette classical music critic

**Rock 'n' Roll auction**

A guitar autographed by the Dave Matthews Band, a photograph signed by Toby Keith and a jersey bearing Ben Roethlisberger's John Hancock are among dozens of celebrity items and collectibles that will be up for bid at Belkin Productions' Great Rock 'n' Roll Auction.

The benefit for the Make-A-Wish Foundation begins at 6 p.m. Thursday at the Hard Rock Cafe at the South Side's Station Square. The event will include acoustic performances by Pittsburgh artists Joe Grushecky, Donnie Iris, Good Brother Earl and others, and will be hosted by radio personalities from WDVE, WXDX, WKST and WWSW.

Some of the items will be offered through a live auction, but bidding for most of the memorabilia will be through silent auction. A $10 donation also registers participants for a drawing for season tickets to the Post-Gazette Pavilion and Chevrolet Amphitheatre. Parking is free with a ticket provided at the door. Make-A-Wish is a nonprofit foundation that grants wishes to children with life-threatening medical conditions.

-- By John Hayes,
Post-Gazette staff writer

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