

Dia de los Muertos Concert Review

by

Elijah Rowe

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Mr. Pecherek

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The November 1 performance of Dia de los Muertos was a unique and spectacular experience that expressed the theme of the Mexican holiday well. The diverse selection of seven historical pieces showcased slow, melancholic tones as well as faster, upbeat ones that all came together in such a way that masterfully conveyed ideas of mourning the dead as well as celebrating the lives of those who have passed away.

The first piece of the performance, “La Boda de Luis Alonso,” by Geronimo Gimenez, is aptly described in the concert program as “light and lively,” and for good reason. The piece makes use of mainly string and woodwind instruments to create a cheerful and airy feel to the music, as well as several instances of loud and bold statements made by a fanfare of brass instruments. Throughout the piece, a rather speedy tempo is maintained, which ensures that the spirited and energetic tone of the music is not lost. Overall, the piece is very vivacious and celebratory, which is fitting considering “La Boda de Luis Alonso” translates to “The Wedding of Luis Alonso,” and weddings are widely celebratory and lively affairs.

The second piece, titled “Pavane pour une infante défunte,” is composed by Maurice Ravel. The piece begins with a French horn playing a slow and melancholic tune, which introduces similarly gloomy notes from an oboe. This sets the stage for the “Pavane for a Dead Princess.” The piece begins in the aforementioned gloomy and gradual way, but slowly picks up other woodwinds as well as the string section, including the harp, to slightly change dynamics and create a thoughtful and almost angelic sound while still keeping a relatively slow tempo. As a whole, this musical piece perfectly captures the mournful, albeit reflective side of death and loss.

The third piece of the concert is an oboe concerto in C minor written by Benedetto Marcello. This piece makes use of the oboe in an entirely different way from the previous piece,

as this time, it is used to create a more wishful, thoughtful sound. String instruments converge with the sounds of the oboe to set a vaguely triumphant tone. Only a few minutes after the piece starts, it seems to end. However, after a short pause, the familiar light humming of the oboe returns, albeit in a slow and dejected tone that now resembles that of the second piece. This continues for several minutes before all goes silent once more. After a short bout of silence, the music picks up once again with the recognizable upbeat, thoughtful sound it had in the beginning of the piece. This piece seems to emanate three concepts in order as it changes: the journey of loved ones' lives, their death and mourning, and finally, celebrating the lives they led.

The next piece of music, titled "España," is a rhapsody for orchestra that was written by Emmanuel Chabrier. This piece starts out quickly with a short but lighthearted tune led by string and brass instruments, but quickly slows back down to near silence before erupting into a climax of music from all sides of the orchestra. This happens multiple times throughout the piece, and it seems as if the piece is comprised of equal parts loud and quiet playing. Crescendos, fanfares, and decrescendos abound, which make this piece sound particularly lively and triumphant as it clearly and loudly celebrates life, rather than mourning death.

The fifth piece, "Estrellita," composed by Manuel M. Ponce, is relatively shorter and quieter than much of the preceding music, but is also very elegant and modest. It is a string piece, which alludes to its fairly quiet nature, as there are no loud brass or woodwind sounds to accompany it. This piece appears to suggest a feeling equivalent to the fond remembrance of a lost loved one, in addition to the reflection on a loved one's life, which certainly corresponds with the theme of the concert.

The second to last piece, from Manuel de Falla's opera titled "La Vida Breve," is a dance piece. It is mostly upbeat, apart from one part about midway through the piece, where it seems to

take on a more sinister tone for a short time before returning back to its aforementioned upbeat tone. Suitably and simply named “Dance No. 1,” it is an energetic piece that makes use of the full orchestra as well as castanets in order to give listeners not only a pleasing piece of music to listen to, but also music that they can actually engage in. One could easily see this music being used in a formal event that involves dancing, such as a ball; after all, it is a dance piece. Keeping with the theme of the concert is Dia de los Muertos, this piece could be seen as a more celebratory one for reasons that the other celebratory pieces are: it is upbeat, and while it is not explicitly cheery, it is most definitely not music meant for mourning.

The seventh and final piece of the performance was actually composed fairly recently. Written only 21 years ago by Arturo Márquez, “Danzón No. 2” is an orchestral piece that begins quiet and simple, but quickly loudens and increases tempo more and more to a climax point before eventually quieting down again in a decrescendo. The orchestra then repeats this process multiple times in such a way that causes the piece to seemingly have an equal amount of soft and loud parts. Like the third piece in the concert, this suggests that multiple ideas are presented in the piece. However, unlike the third piece, this piece only has two major ideas being presented: the quiet yet positive and reflectiveness of death and the loud, magnificent expedition that is life.

In closing, the November 1 Dia de los Muertos concert was undoubtedly a great success. Everyone involved with the Illinois Valley Symphony Orchestra did an absolutely outstanding job at showcasing the Mexican holiday. The seven choices of music were skillfully chosen and arranged; there was an even mix of slow, sorrowful music and upbeat, celebratory music, as well as profound and contemplative music. As a result, all aspects of the holiday were presented well: the troubling deaths of loved ones, the celebration of their lives, and the thoughtful reflection that comes with both mourning and celebrating the life of someone lost.