



The Music of the Night

Dates and Venue 9 & 10 October 2009, 8pm | Orpheum Theatre

Conductor Bramwell Tovey, **Featured performers** Betsy Wolfe and Eric Kunze - vocals

Reviewer John Jane

The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra befittingly dedicated this concert, the first of this season's Pops Series to the legendary Erich Kunzel. Had the late director of the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra not passed away on the first of September at the age of 74 he would have been conducting the VSO in this weekend's performance. Bramwell Tovey, was the stand-in conductor, surely an unusual role for him, and obviously serving a labour of love. Maestro Tovey was in fine form; both as conductor and with his signature stand-up shtick rolling off anecdotes about his friend and former colleague.

The Orchestra got the concert started in lively fashion with a cheerily bombastic interpretation of Leonard Bernstein's *Overture to Candide*. Its quickly changing meters and harmonic textures have made the piece an orchestra staple and a popular favorite among concert programmers.

The orchestra continued with Bernstein's music with a selection from the ground-breaking musical, *West Side Story*. But this time joined on the stage by singers Betsy Wolfe and Eric Kunze (yes, the similarity of his name to Erich Kunzel is a little eerie). Many of the songs from this musical have become standards in their own right: I Feel Pretty, Maria and Tonight are a few. Betsy Wolfe began what became a sparkling Friday evening performance with I Feel Pretty. Ms Wolfe is a very attractive strawberry blonde, but looked absolutely stunning in a fiery red ankle length dress – the first of five gorgeous gowns she wore during the evening.

Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg's intense score from *Miss Saigon* set to the classic theme inspired by Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* evokes a surreal and touching picture of the end of the Vietnam War. The UBC Opera Ensemble performed with the utmost virtuosity *The Heat is On in Saigon*, *Bui Doi* and *This is the Hour*. The latter performed together with Betsy Wolfe and Eric Kunze. Ms Wolfe and Mr. Kunze also sang a duet with *The Last Night of the World* from the same show.

Betsy Wolfe has one of the purist voices I've ever heard on a concert stage. Her renditions of the haunting *Everything's All right* and the rather more quixotic, *I Don't Know How to Love Him* from *Jesus Christ Superstar* was truly rapturous. This musical was the closest to *REAL* rock opera that Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice ever achieved – and the most inspired.

After the intermission, Maestro Tovey, in shallow theatre lighting, delighted the audience with his blithe, "hammed-up" solo of the *Phantom Overture* on the Wurlitzer electric organ, brought on the stage solely for this performance. Also from the *Phantom* selection Eric Kunze's full-blooded rendition of the darkly erotic *The Music of the Night* and UBC Opera Ensemble's account of *Masquerade* was immensely satisfying.

The awe-inspiring music of Boublil and Schönberg's *Les Misérables* is doubtless still ringing in the ears of Vancouver musical theatre audiences after the Artsclub's incredible early summer run at the Stanley Alliance Stage. The score boasts beautiful ballads like *Bring Him Home* as well as rousing anthems such as *Do You Hear the People Sing* with which the orchestra, the ensemble and featured singers Betsy Wolfe and Eric Kunze all joined forces to end the concert's regular programme.

In a final tribute to Erich Kunzel, Wolfe, Kunze and Tovey form a terzetto in singing *Memories* in a generous encore. The late Maestro would certainly have been impressed.