

Demons and angels

All-Mozart concert takes 150 up and down the celestial stairs

By LAWRENCE COSENTINO

At first blush, it looks like the Lansing Symphony Orchestra is buying a stairway to Heaven by putting on an all-Mozart night Saturday. The revered composer, like the

Masterworks 5:

Mozart Mania

Lansing Symphony Orchestra
8 p.m. Saturday, March 5
Tickets start at \$20
Wharton Center
750 E. Shaw Lane, East Lansing
(517) 487-5001,
lansingsymphony.org

chocolate confecti-
on that bears
his name, is the
epitome of finely
wrought, gold-
leafed, thrice-lac-
quered decadence.

Not so fast,
powdered wig fe-
tishists. In the vein
of "The Twilight
Zone" host Rod
Serling, Lansing

Symphony conductor and musical director Timothy Muffitt submits Mozart's minor-key Symphony No. 40, the main work on Saturday's slate, for your approval.

"It's like M.C. Escher," Muffitt said. "I see a staircase, but is it going up or down? There are endless things to discover in this music. There is something elusive about it."

From the start, Mozart gives your kayak a sneaky push into choppy water. There isn't even an opening "ta-da" where you can clear your phlegm unobtrusively.

"It starts with this churning undulation,"

Muffitt said. "Then a melody begins in the first violins, but the arrival point — we feel like it comes about two bars later. It's not crystal clear what is what."

The musical patterns tessellate, like Escher's interlocking demons and angels. The second movement settles into an elegant, walking tempo, but the footsteps get strangely insistent. The counter-melodies, like shadows, stretch out in front, as if they were coming alive and taking you for a walk instead of the other way around.

Symphony No. 40 was written in 1788, the same year as symphonies No. 39 and No. 41. The latter was the composer's final symphony; he died in 1791.

"It is unlike any other piece of music ever written," Muffitt said of Symphony No. 40. "When I study it, I wonder where Mozart would have taken music if he had lived 10 years longer."

From the standpoint of selling tickets, Saturday's program is a pretty safe bet, but it's not a sellout in the figurative sense. A night of Mozart is a venture into pure music, without many of the biographical, emotional or historical hooks other composers dangle in front of the listener. Some people find the symphony tragic, owing largely to its minor-key tilt, but the mood is not easy to pin down.

"Mozart wrote some of his sunniest music during his darkest times and vice versa," Muffitt said. "That's not to say the music doesn't elicit an emotional response — it certainly does — but I'm not sure that, with the 18th century composers, the music was

tied into their life story."

Muffitt considers the 40th symphony to be an extension of the emotional style made famous by Mozart's teacher, Haydn, called "sturm und drang" ("kaboom and aargh!" in my translation). Instead of ratcheting up the drama, as Beethoven did later, Mozart took it to a rarefied artistic level. The secret to the symphony's originality, to Muffitt's ear, lies in its ever-changing harmonies and "powerful use of dissonance."

There's a decisive ending, but it defies emotional category.

"It raises as many questions as it answers," Muffitt said. "That's one of the reasons it's so engaging to listeners."

Mystery is the secret weapon that makes Mozart one of a small handful of composers Muffitt would dare to program for a whole night.

"As great as (others) might be, I'm not sure they hold up," he said. "There isn't a way to create enough variety."

Saturday's slate throws several change-ups. The first work is for strings alone, the second features the winds, and Symphony No. 40, in Muffitt's words, "is a world all unto itself."

The music is varied by chronology too, with representative works from Mozart's early, middle and late periods — although that's slicing it pretty finely.

"To say 'late work' for someone who lived to be 33 years old is a little misleading, but they do come from distinct periods and have distinct characteristics," Muffitt said.

Putting together a whole night of Mozart was a roll in clover for the maestro.

"There's a seemingly infinite choice of things to do with his music," he said.

Two of those things are dispensing with blurring the line between grand symphonic and intimate chamber music. Instead of the usual concerto feature, Muffitt will draw out a primo ensemble of 11 musicians to delve into a suite of music from Mozart's "Gran Partita," a crystalline showcase for the composer's ecstatic, sinuous wind melodies.

"I felt like it's such extraordinary music, but I didn't want it to take up almost an entire concert," Muffitt said. (The complete work lasts almost an hour in the director's cut.) "So I took the liberty of crafting a 'Gran Partita' sampler."

The partita wasn't conceived as serious concert-hall stuff, so there are several ways to slice and dice it without horrifying purists. Muffitt included two graceful minuets and, he assured, he hasn't left out the famous adagio. That's the movement that starts out like a "rusty squeeze box" and turns into the "voice of God," as F. Murray Abraham, playing rival composer Antonio Salieri, enviously croaks in the Mozart biopic, "Amadeus."

By the way, Muffitt endorses "Amadeus" as the best movie on classical music he's ever seen.

"It was brilliantly depicted, true to the spirit of the music," he said. "All of us that saw the film came away wanting more Mozart. I'm a big fan."