

Still Magical, And Still Free

July 1, 1999

Despite threatening showers and dreadful humidity, Tuesday night was another welcome opportunity to savor a local treasure: the Naumburg Orchestral Concerts in their 94th season. One of New York's old banking families, the Naumburgs enriched Gotham by endowing these concerts, erecting the bandshell, founding our commercial classical-music radio station (WQXR), and underwriting a generation a competition to reward talented musicians. Generations of New Yorkers have savored these Central Park concerts, "a magical occasion, and it's all free," as E.B. White wrote in 1949. Not as famous as the Met in the Parks, not as loud as the Philharmonic's fireworks extravaganzas, the Naumburg concerts draw grateful listeners through first-rate music performances. Tuesday's event continued the tradition.

Another asset of New York's musical life, the New York Chamber Symphony, led by Robert Mann (Naumburg prize winner, 1941), offered fine performances of three 18th century orchestral works. The *Symphonia No. 3 in C* by C.P.E. Bach was a good opening: Graceful and elegant, it settled the large crowd of listeners and drew more - on bikes, roller skates or pushing strollers. (Some in-line skaters twirled and circled in time to the *allegretto*.)

Mozart's *Concerto in A for Violin* offered a showcase for the 1998 Naumburg winner, 25-year-old violinist Axel Strauss. Despite the humidity, which played havoc with the strings (between movements, the soloist had so much trouble tuning he mock-seriously offered his violin to Mann for help), Strauss made an impressive showing. He demonstrated commendable agility in the brisk passagework of the *allegro aperto*. In the final, lengthy rondo, the movement's architecture was clearly delineated. But sometimes musicians show what they're really made of when there's no virtuosity to hide behind, and in the *adagio*, Strauss eloquently caught the yearning ardor, so characteristic of Mozart, that throbs through the center of this concerto.

Placing Haydn's somewhat less exciting *Symphony No. 86 in D Major* at the end of the program may have seemed a risky move but, in fact, it worked. In the then-cooler air, with trees whispering in the night shade and fire-flies amusing younger audience members, Haydn came over well. Conductor Mann (recently retired from his longtime position as first violin of the Juilliard Quartet) was at his best here, showing fine control and sympathy for the music and earning a warm ovation.

It was disturbing to observe the shocking condition of the Naumburg Bandshell. Built in 1923, it was almost bulldozed by the city in the early 1990s. Public dismay and litigation saved this gift to the city. Amid the cleaner, safer Central Park, the shell now looks like a neglected poor relation. Current Naumburg president Christopher W. London reminded the audience that next week's concert marks the sixth anniversary of the decision that saved the edifice. In a city with a budget surplus (and a classical music-loving mayor), Parks Commissioner Henry Stern and the Central Parks Conservancy might undertake restoration of the cherishable jewel, another glimmer in the enchantment of Central Park in the dark

— Patrick Giles, **Newsday**