



A Foretaste of Christmas

11 Dec 2010

This must be what virtuosity is all about! No doubt, the black-clad quartet performing on the stage – adorned with Italian colours of green-white-red as the backdrop – has paid its dues in the classical music world. And doesn't a hint of effortless seep through their interpretation of the three Gioacchino Rossini's compositions: "La Danza" (Tarantella Napoletana), "La Promessa" (Canzonetta) and "L'Invito" (Bolero)!

A quick consultation of the concert programme's booklet introduces them as follows: Alessandro Vuono (piano), Francesco Clemente (violin), Antonio Arcuri (clarinet) and Massimo Celiberto (horn). With the soprano Rosario Buscemi, they make up the BelCanto Ensemble.

This concert, holding at the MUSON Centre's Agip Recital Hall, is the group's second outing since their first at the Italian General Consul's residence on Friday, December 4. By the time you read this, they would have long concluded their last one at the Abuja Transcorp Hilton Hotel scheduled for Monday, December 6.

In case you haven't guessed by now, this is a collaborative effort between the Consulate General of Italy and the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON). A Christmas Concert, it is designed to be. But the date curiously coincides with the 219th anniversary of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's death. So, it comes somewhat as a surprise that the prodigious luminary does not even get a mention in the evening's programme. Of course, that should be something for the Austrian Embassy in Nigeria to contemplate on. Mozart was, after all, one of their own. This is even when he has become mankind's common heritage.

Back on the stage, Rosario Buscemi is teasing her vocal cords and testing their limits. A natural, no doubt, she is endowed with lustrous credentials, burnished nevertheless with a slew of laurels and performances. Isn't there something admirably self-assured about her stage deportment! Unhurried in her efforts, she coaxes out soothing melodies to the delight of the audience.

Fatima Anyekema's recital of another Rossini piece, "Di Tanti Palpiti" is another delight. Indeed, this solo should have whetted the audience's appetite for the next offering. But then, it takes a keen-eared, proficient music critic – which I'm obviously not – to discern the knockout factor in the coalescing of these obvious talents. How does one sincerely appraise the laudable efforts of a contralto and a soprano, when all they need make are mewling sounds in "Duetto Buffo Di Due Gatti" (humorous duet for two cats) by Rossini and G Berthold?

For a reminder that the Yuletide season is here, skip to the "Cantique de Noël". And going by a Protestant tradition, this is an Advent Sunday. Buscemi has just concluded her recital of Max Reger's lullaby, "Maria Wiegenlied". This is coming after the

Nigerian-born tenor Joseph Oparamanuike's entrée with Giacomo Puccini's "E Lucevan Le Stelle". Now that she is once more before the audience, it's hard not to applaud such a first-rate rendition of the well-known Adolphe Adam's "O Holy Night".

What else burnishes the Christmas character of this concert more than the rendition of Franz Xavier Gruber's Christmas Carol "Stille Nacht" (Silent Night or Astro del Ciel) by the trio Buscemi, Oparamanuike and Anyekema? Now doesn't that rather make the red white-rimmed Santa Claus's caps on their heads look like over egging the pudding?

Well, thank goodness for the aural and visual break that ensues with the intermission. The quartet welcomes the audience back with light-hearted pieces like Astor Piazzolla's "Libertango" and "Adios Nonino", George Gershwin's "The Man I Love" and "I Got Rhythm" and "Bohemian Rhapsody" a song by the British rock band Queen.

Lost in the enchanting and danceable rhythms of the Argentine tango composer's pieces, it is difficult to discern the transition to Gershwin's tunes. Call it a non-stop aural blur, replete with its exciting moment. It dovetails into Queen's 1975 song beautifully. This could have been a dance hall treat! Yet, it is no less entertaining the way it is...a concert piece.

All of a sudden, it starts to look like a Puccini treat. Buscemi, obviously the brightest star of this concert, first enthralls the audience with "Quando Me N'Vo" in a solo performance before pairing with Oparamanuike for the no-less entertaining "O Soave Fanciulla".

Of course, it is expected that the concert will offer the Italian-born soprano another opportunity to duet with the contralto Anyekema. "Duetto del Fiori" (The Flower Duet), taken from a Léo Delibes's opera in three acts titled Lakmé, projects the contrasting songstresses in their elements.

Enter the next duet performance. Oparamanuike pairs with Anyekema for Kehinde Oretimehin's Yoruba adaptation of "Mary Had a Little Lamb". "Meri L Omo Aguntan", as the song is titled, offers the Nigerian duo the sole opportunity to give the concert its only local flavour. It is gratifying to note from the programme booklet that the composer is a product of the MUSON Diploma School. Besides being a music teacher and a MUSON Choir member, he also plays instruments like the piano, the saxophone and the recorder.

It is soon over. The programme's closing piece is taken from Leonard Bernstein's operetta, Candide, which is adapted from the French author Voltaire's original 1759 satirical novella. According to the programme, "Cunegonde's coloratura aria Glitter and Be Gay is a favourite showpiece of many sopranos. It is very popular among major music schools as a student show because of the quality of its music and the opportunity it offers to student singers".

From the moment Buscemi lunges into this piece with gusto, it is clear that the audience will reward her with a standing ovation. So light-hearted and full of drama, it is easily the most exciting offering of the concert. Not even the actual closing piece rivals its enthralling features. This concert held at the Agip Recital Hall of the MUSON Centre in Onikan, Lagos on December 5.