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Culture Club

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A Look Back at an Amazing Weekend

Reviews of MSO, Wild Space and Skylight shows

by [Paul Kosidowski](#) | Tuesday 2/2/2010

A full weekend has passed, which gave people a lot to think about. Here are some of my thoughts:

The epic battled the elegant at the [Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra](#) on Friday night, and there were lots of winners all around. Edo de Waart led his first concert of 2010, sandwiching the most delicate of Mozart piano concertos between two sonic powerhouses. The Mozart more than held its own.

Esa-Pekka Salonen's *Gambit* opened with nine-minutes of post-minimalist power, a surging tone-poem



with oodles of percussion effects that charged to a full-tilt climax. It was a proper introduction to a program which showcased Richard Wagner—the five-hour *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg* distilled (by the Dutch composer Henk de Vlieger) into a narrative tone poem that captured both the spirit and narrative of the original. There was great spirit in this marathon, and lots of big brass fanfares as you'd expect with Wagner. But the great surprise here (I confess I've never heard *Meistersinger* in its entirety) were the long, muscular string passages. De Waart kept things dynamic and unified. But the real gem of the evening was Ingrid Fliter's reading of Mozart's 23rd Piano Concerto. Perhaps in the spirit of the evening, there was no early music coolness here. De

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Wart put down his baton for the first two movements—to better coax out flowing romantic lines from his players. And in the achingly beautiful second movement, he and Fliter took their time, content to let the mournful passages breathe with fullness and life.

Mozart's concerto dates from around the same time as *The Marriage of Figaro*, and those who grabbed a double dose of Mozart were not disappointed.

For nearly two-thirds of the Skylight Opera's production of *Figaro*, we're in a delirious tangled confection. Beaumarchais's story piles on the comic intrigue—debts paid with promises of marriage, assignations and revenge plots—and the farce is livened by Mozart's rich musical characters and his tour de force trios, quartets, etc. that seems to make the plots strands grow tighter with every cadence. Then, in the middle of Act Three, **Tanya Kruse** (playing the Countess Almaviva) steps to the front of the stage. After a few angry outbursts, the music settles into the achy lilt of "Dove Sono" (or "Everything Is Gone" in Andrew Porter's translation). Suddenly, time seems to stop. The small musical ensemble in the pit (Jamie Johns' piano supplemented by a half-dozen winds) seems just right. And the candy-colored energy that has bounced around the theater for almost two-hours vanishes with the vision (and sound) of a woman saturated with sadness. Kruse caresses her husband's desk chair as if hints of the couple's past were embedded in the leather.



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Other productions of *Figaro* mine these dark sentiments more thoroughly, but Bill Theisen's Skylight offering really only needs this moment. It casts a shadow backward and forward, and makes us see the whole story through different eyes. The sudden reconciliation of Count and Countess seems strained. His lusty advances at the opera's beginning are no longer just silliness.

Not that *Figaro* can't be enjoyed for the pure joy it spills by the minute. Theisen has assembled a group of singers who draw every bit of divinity out of Mozart's melodies and harmonies. And they're having a ball, in a production that is pared down both musically and visually.

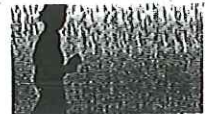
This isn't everyone's *Figaro*. The glories of Mozart's orchestrations are just hinted at, and Andrew Porter's English, for all its clarity, just doesn't have the same punch and zest as Da Ponte's original Italian. But Theisen knows (and gets) what he wants: pure and beautiful singing, clear storytelling, and effervescent spirit. Who could ask for anything more?

And then where was Wild Space....

The dimensions were impressive: six hours, close to two dozen artists, 60,000 square feet of space (my best guess). But the sentiments of Wild Space Dance Company's rapturous new piece, "By Accident and Necessity," are quite simple. Time passes; things change; and to paraphrase one of my former professors, "I'm dying before your eyes."

Though the potent combination of Loewen's theatrical sense and choreography, and Tom Bamberger's gorgeous "moving-still photographs" hardly calls to mind the doomed fatalism of Beckett. There is rapture and beauty even as time ticks along.

Produced in a huge sixth-floor industrial space in the Fifth Ward, "By Accident..." is built around three 10 x 20 foot projections of Bamberger's video works—landscapes and still-lives that shift imperceptibly over the course of several minutes. "Brown Grass," a 2003 photo is a wide swath of tall plants--here it slowly accordions into an almost abstract image of vertical slashes and scratches. Other pieces are not as easy to place: a leaf slowly disappears against a pockmarked expanse of concrete, a lake-bottom strewn with leaves and stones seems to mold over with a thick layer of cobwebs. As abstractions, they seem to undulate as one part or another pushes forward or



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over this potent backdrop, Loewen's dancers enact little rituals of detail—small gestures, such as opening a