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Review: 'Fireworks' concert lights up Lied

Cartoons provide classy scores for chamber group's performance

By Chuck Berg

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Fireworks, the acclaimed eight-strong chamber ensemble from New York, lit up Lawrence's Lied Center on Saturday night with a program proving that beloved cartoon characters like Bugs Bunny and Road Runner have provided more than laughs.

For Fireworks' founder-leader Brian Coughlin, while tickling the funny bone, the classic Warner Bros. cartoons offered a valuable musical education as well. Where else could one have heard such richly varied and perfectly executed scores where bits of classical, opera, jazz, folk and schmaltz combined with such telling effects? As Coughlin explained from the stage: "These cartoons, which I first heard while eating cereal in front of the television, got me to thinking about how film composers such as Carl Stalling and Raymond Scott influenced today's music."

"Cartoon," the program put together by Coughlin and Fireworks especially for its Lied Center appearance, made the point in entertaining and musically vivid ways. Coughlin's "Cartoon/Funky" (2005) homage to the legacy of Looney Tunes, anchored by the leader's insistent electric bass, was a zany, jazzed-up chase and a perfect keynote for the first part of the bill devoted to contemporary music inspired by cartoons. John Zorn's solo piano work, "Carney" (1989), performed brilliantly by James Johnston, was a kaleidoscopic collage of seemingly disparate yet ultimately blending parts enlivened by Johnston's head-butts and body-slams to the keyboard, bluesy strolls, languorous arpeggios, and furiously swirling microbursts. Coughlin's "Big Mama Thornton," inspired by a Far Side cartoon, and modern music icon John Adams' ear-catching "Roadrunner" (1992), ended the first half on engagingly quirky and compelling high notes.

After intermission, Fireworks addressed the work of Raymond Scott, who some might recall as the conductor of the "Lucky Strike Hit Parade" during television's early days in the 1950s. Here, Fireworks' virtuosic players -- flutist Jennifer Grim, saxophonist Michael Ibrahim, violinist Jennifer Choi, cellist Leigh Stuart, electric guitarist Oren Fader, percussionist Eric Poland, pianist Johnston and bassist Coughlin -- dug in for Scott classics such as the finger-bustin' "Powerhouse" (1936). Two Carl Stalling scores, one of which accompanied the antics of Flip the Frog in a screening of "The Village Smitty" (1931), were particular crowd-pleasers. The biggest laughs came at the end with Fireworks' energetic and perfectly synchronized recreation of Milt Franklyn's adaptation of Franz von Suppe's operatic airs for "Baton Bunny" (1959), one of Bugs Bunny's bravura performances.

"Cartoon" was serious fun of the highest -- and funniest -- order.

Bravo, Fireworks!