

Sweet saxophone and Amram's 80th

By Betty Ligon | Posted: Sunday, December 5, 2010 1:19 pm

My El Paso Symphony seatmate confessed she was not looking forward to the concert with guest artist saxophonist Kenneth Radnofsky and the El Paso premiere of composer David Amram's "Ode to Lord Buckley." I sheepishly sort of agreed.

What a surprise it turned out to be!

Afterward we couldn't have been more appreciative for the unbridled program, under the peppy direction of maestro Sarah Ioannides. We loved it!

Amram's genius was apparent in his blend of musical styles and its expansive eclecticism. This was as far from the standard honk and tweet one might expect from a popular brass instrument trying to sound serious as a cat trying to bark.

In scabbling through Internet websites about Amram, we found a common description attached to his name, "Renaissance man." I found he's composed more than 100 orchestral and chamber music works; he wrote opera scores and those for theater and film, including "Splendor in the Grass" and "The Manchurian Candidate;" and he's a conductor, jazz virtuoso, horn and piano performer, book author and teacher!

So who was Lord Buckley? Nothing to do with royalty. He was a little known comedian and scat singer of the 1950s and 1960s. Amram played for him in jazz clubs and this concerto was a nod to Buckley's talent. "Ode to Lord Buckley" is actually a "Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra," written in 1981.

Though we rarely think of a sax player as able to convey truly classical sounds, Kenneth Radnofsky showed off his virtuoso technique with grace and skill. His cadenzas were intervals of pure joy and exhilaration. His pitch is right on. A warm tone kept his saxophone tootlings within classical standards.

After the long and orchestral Overture, a punchy percussive flourish and a wink to upcoming jazz and bluesy themes, Radnofsky jumped right in, improvising as he went and later sent various orchestral ensembles scrambling to accompany the difficult score.

It was the second movement, Ballad, that required Radnofsky to play a melody, something sax players are rarely required to do. He sailed through the lyrical lines with an accomplished ensemble of strings and woodwinds to back the beauty of the piece.

A dramatic change of pace marked the finale in a section titled "Taxim Ayn Adir." Drums and Middle Eastern rhythms complemented the saxophonist who exhibited astounding virtuosic variations. Different and dynamic with its eclectic mix of orchestral and solo sax, "Lord Buckley" was indeed royal entertainment.

Other works given polished performances were George Gershwin's jazzy "Cuban Overture" and Samuel Barber's sensitive "Music for a Scene from Shelley," based on the poet's play, "Prometheus Unbound."

An added enhancement to the concert was the presence of the personable composer. At the Thursday rehearsal break, Amram was honored with a cake celebrating his 80th birthday. It also marked the premiere of the work commissioned by the Portland Symphony. Radnofsky was the soloist then on the business end of the rarely used saxophone as a solo instrument.

Ioannides fronted her musicians with energy and enthusiasm as usual, in spite of her ailing right knee, set for surgery the following Tuesday. No chair was necessary as expected.

As part of her unusual programming with all-American composers – Ernst Bloch became a citizen in 1920s – she roped the audience into singing the anthem in the finale of Bloch's "America: An Epic Rhapsody for Orchestra."

We were given printouts of the words in the not very interesting anthem. Ioannides led us through three trial runs before the audience bravely sang along with the help of University of Texas at El Paso's Chorale, Men's and Women's Glee Clubs. It was capped off in a high-octane finish that brought a default standing reaction from the audience, including me and my companion.

Opera on screen

Opera lovers have been piling into theaters at Cielo Vista and on Remcon to enjoy live broadcasts of operas being staged on Saturday afternoons at the Metropolitan Opera.

Tickets are \$20, but that beats the price by probably 100 percent what you'd pay for a lesser seat at the opera in New York City.

The Met revealed this season it transmitted 12 operas live to 1,500 theaters in 46 countries around the world. The Royal Opera in London and La Scala in Milan have gotten into the act. The London Royal Ballet, Paris Opera Ballet and Bolshoi Ballet, Moscow, have dipped a toe into the big screen.

An article in The New York Times says orchestras "are jumping on the HD bandwagon," that "the Los Angeles Philharmonic will start beaming live performances to 450 theaters in North America and the Philadelphia Orchestra is sending nine concerts this season to some 30 theaters and 50 retirement homes."

It's more of a gamble for orchestras since players just sit in black suits. But I think it's the wave of the future.

To reach arts columnist Betty Ligon, e-mail bettyligon@sbcglobal.net, call (915) 833-8750, or send mail to 300 Shadow Mountain, Apt. 1109, El Paso TX 79912-4016.