

AN INDIE-CLASSICAL EXPLOSION

New classical ensemble *Sound of Late* debuts, *Cherry Blossom Musical Arts* hosts a showcase and more

Like the blossoms that have been emerging this spring, Oregon classical music is entering a period of renewal. Earlier this month, we told you about the young musicians who've just started the new Delgani String Quartet, devoted to both classics and contemporary sounds. At 8 pm Friday, April 24, Eugene sees the debut of another exciting young ensemble at the Broadway House concert series (911 W. Broadway, 686-9270). **Sound of Late** (Andrew Stiefel, viola and electronics; Rebecca Olason, horn; Milo Fultz, double bass; Sarah Pyle, flutes; Bryce Caster, violin) performs music by leading American (including Oregonian) and European composers such as Finland's renowned Kaija Saariaho, Italy's Salvatore Sciarrino, Daniel Bernard Roumain and Ada Gentile.

The ensemble will also present a set of improvisations inspired by the venerable Bay Area composer Pauline Oliveros, who is still composing in her 80s. Like many such groups now flowering around the country, Sound of Late cheerfully crosses artificial genre boundaries and reaches out beyond their music stands to connect today's sounds to their community. This show launches the ensemble's inaugural tour of the Pacific Northwest.

Speaking of classical music in bloom, Eugene's music nonprofit, **Cherry Blossom Musical Arts**, has been revivifying Oregon music for years, with founders **Paul Safar** (who last year won the Oregon Music Teachers Association composer of the year award) and **Nancy Wood** garnering deserved laurels for their performances of Safar's listener-friendly original music around the state.

Safar's entertaining, inventive new music gets a much-deserved local showcase 7:30 pm Saturday, April 25, at First Christian Church (1166 Oak St.). Performers include **Delgani String Quartet**, **Pickles and Peppers Clarinet Quartet**, actor **Richard Leebrick**, juggler **Andrew Teem**, **Ben Farrell** and much more.

A versatile composer who's written rock, pop and jazz over a 25-year career, Safar has lately been blending these elements into some of Oregon's finest original, classically

informed music written today. His partner, Wood, sings much of it with theatrical flair and classical nuance.

This weekend also offers an *opera-tunity* to hear older music when the award-winning UO Opera Ensemble performs Engelbert Humperdinck's greatest hit — the German composer's 1893 version of *Hänsel and Gretel*, by the Brothers Grimm, at 7:30 pm Friday, April 24, and 3 pm Sunday, April 26, at the Hult Center's Soreng Theater. They'll perform in German with projected English-language supertitles.

Chamber Music Amici looks even farther back — to the 18th-century Baroque and Classical eras, when they welcome oboist **Allan Vogel** and flutist **Janice Tipton** to The Shedd to play music by the most renowned Baroque composer of his time, Georg Philipp Telemann, as well as that of his contemporary Johann Fasch, and the youngest son of one of their contemporaries, Johann Christian Bach, who taught the young Mozart. Cellist **Steven Pologe**, violist **Holland Phillips**, harpsichordist **Julia Brown** and violinists **Pilar Bradshaw** and **Sharon Schuman** join Vogel, one of the great oboists of our time, who has made many appearances at the Oregon Bach Festival and Chamber Music Northwest.

The Shedd is also the place to hear singer-songwriter **Chico Schwall** and friends' tribute to American folk songs (by Joe Hill, Woody Guthrie, Florence Reece, Phil Ochs, Harry Stamper and more), celebrating working people and calling for social and economic justice, 7:30 pm Thursday, April 30. With rising inequality worse in this country than any time since those relatively halcyon days of protest songs, and International Workers' Day (April 30), the show is a timely reminder of music's power to fight injustice.

Speaking of folk music, the Eugene Concert Choir joins the dozens of singers, dancers and instrumentalists of the Willis Clan in traditional and updated Celtic music 8 pm Saturday, April 25, at the Hult. **The Stomptowners** and **Maldon Meehan Dancers** bring more Irish music and dance to a house concert 7 pm Sunday, May 3, at 755 River Rd. (Contact mmeyer@efn.org). ■

THEATER BY ISABEL ZACHARIAS

DREAMING THE DREAM

Cottage Theatre proves community theaters can do *Les Misérables* too

Let's be real: At least 80 percent of the time, taking on a production of *Les Misérables* is a bad idea. "Ambitious" doesn't begin to describe this excruciatingly melodramatic 1,500-page historical novel-turned-stage musical.

Many a non-professional theater has "taken a chance" on the epic French Revolution story and ended up with three straight hours of nothing but strained, yell-like singing and fake blood — in fact, it's assumed the bragging rights awarded for overcoming *Les Misérables*' technical challenges are the real reason to produce the show.

The challenge, then, becomes producing the musical in such a way as to distract the audience from how damn hard it is, and this is (surprise, surprise) the hardest part.

It's not necessarily expected that Cottage Theatre be an exception to the "bad idea" rule — and in some ways, they're not. The surprise, however, is how many things Cottage gets right.

The production does fall victim to number one of many potential roadblocks: the initial task of casting. *Les Mis* incorporates more than 30 named characters — none of which is without a nearly impossible vocal solo.

Kory Weimer, as young, heartfelt revolutionary Marius, was insecure in several vocal passages. Maia Wilhour, playing Marius' ardent and unrequited admirer Eponine, did a similarly passable job; of the leads, these two were the shakiest, often relying on pop-ish glides between notes to stay in tune and unable to keep their faces from betraying their level of effort.

What's remarkable, though, is that these were the only two prominent performances that didn't quite land. Patriarchal lead Jean Valjean, for instance, is one of the most



KORY WEIMER AND MELISSA MILLER IN *LES MISÉRABLES*

difficult and coveted roles in musical theater history, and Lanny Mitchell's acting as Valjean was both intimate and commanding, accompanied by vocals soaked in pathos and a tasteful soul-spin added on top of flawless tuning.

Tracy Nygard, as suffering single mother Fantine, was an equally breathtaking voice. Where Mitchell took a more contemporary approach, Nygard showed off her formidable operatic skill — her rendition of "I Dreamed a Dream" sounded not only ethereally effortless but emotionally authentic.

The quality of the chorus ensemble (generally number two on the list of this show's pitfalls) didn't smack one bit

of "community theater" either. *Les Misérables* is, after all, a story of society en masse rising up and proving its strength and, with every "pretend-to-be-talking-to-each-other-in-public" scene, this ensemble proved it was no less vital than the leads. Ensemble acting was at times more convincing than lead acting.

Watching this production is a transcendent experience of the story and its full-bodied characters — not bad for a show in which everyone's secretly waiting for something to go wrong. ■

Les Misérables plays through May 3 at Cottage Theatre, 700 Village Dr., Cottage Grove; \$22-\$26, tickets at 942-8001.