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REVIEW: BSO enchants with Shakespeare celebration

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The Boston Symphony Orchestra performs Mendelssohn's "Incidental music to A Midsummer Night's Dream" with singers and actors, Thursday, Jan. 28, 2016. Courtesy Photo/Winslow Townson

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The Boston Symphony Orchestra performs Mendelssohn's "Incidental music to A Midsummer Night's Dream" with singers and actors, Thursday, Jan. 28, 2016. Courtesy Photo/Winslow Townson

By Keith Powers/Correspondent

Posted Jan. 29, 2016 at 10:48 AM

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BOSTON - All the world's a stage. For the next month, that includes Symphony Hall.

This obvious observation gets extra support in February, as the Boston Symphony Orchestra commemorates the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death with three Bard-inspired programs.

In Thursday evening's opening presentation, BSO music director Andris Nelsons, in his first 2016 appearance with his orchestra, led a program focused on Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, which ranged from comic to challenging.

The evening featured a semi-staged adaption of the comedy, conceived by Bill Barclay, director of music at Shakespeare's Globe in London. Cutting straight to the conflict (and resolution) between the king and queen of the fairies, Oberon and Titania, and supported by the glorious incidental music that Mendelssohn composed for the play, Barclay's staging turned Symphony Hall into a forest of enchantments.

Mendelssohn's music was meant to fill intermissions, give introductions and highlight various snippets of the action; Barclay's condensed version allowed the play to have some life, and for Mendelssohn's score to gain a lively context.

Actors Carson Elrod (Puck, Mendelssohn, Bottom), Will Lyman (Oberon), Karen MacDonald

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Electric Haze

Chris Reddy Acoustic Loops from Hell

8:00 pm

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(Titania), and Antonio Weissinger (Changeling) filled the stage with magical action, supported by the lustrous singing (and acting) of soprano Amanda Forsythe and mezzo Abigail Fischer. Women from the Tanglewood Festival Chorus supported the vocal lines.

As intriguing and unusual as it was to have actors onstage at a BSO performance, it was Mendelssohn's music that captivated most thoroughly. Every performance of this score reminds how intriguingly appropriate this music is to the atmosphere of the play, moving from magical to comic to worldly with seamless transitions.

Nelsons took a surprisingly hands off approach to the familiar work, allowing many sections, especially the familiar Wedding March, to go largely unsupervised, the orchestra left to its own devices. The result was a brisk and colloquial feel to the performance, well-suited to the evening's unusual presentation. Forsythe and Fischer's duet in the Song of the Chorus made everyone wish that Mendelssohn had written more extensively for his singers.

The program began with Weber's "Oberon" overture, itself offering moments both as tender as the love-making in play, and as daft and quirky as Bottom himself. A precise, aching horn

solo by principal James Sommerville opened the work and set an enchanted mood.

Not all was magic and allure. The orchestra reprised the Eighth Symphony by Hans Werner Henze, a 1993 commission by the BSO to commemorate its own centennial. The BSO played the work a second time in 2001, and although its only performances have come a decade apart, it still needs repeated listenings to plumb its complex textures and rich sound-world.

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