

Greg Sandow

A Bad Caramoor Press Release

Here we go again

I've commented here from time to time on bad press releases, but here's one that makes me lose my patience. It arrived as an e-mail today:

Hello,

Caramoor International Music Festival's 60th anniversary season begins on June 25th at 7 p.m. with *Ode to Joy*, a joyous musical celebration featuring Beethoven's immortal Ninth Symphony in the Venetian Theater. Artistic Advisor and Principal Conductor Peter Oundjian leads the all-Beethoven program featuring the Orchestra of St. Luke's and The Collegiate Chorale, with Janice Chandler-Eteme, soprano; Mary Phillips, mezzo-soprano; Simon O'Neill, tenor; and Philip Cutlip, bass-baritone. The program opens with the Overture to Fidelio and is followed by Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in its first Caramoor performance.

I'm sorry, but this is just...well, the word that occurs to me isn't polite. "Joyous musical celebration," "Beethoven's immortal Ninth Symphony" -- these phrases don't mean anything. They're empty hype. They're an affront to Beethoven, who had more noble things in mind when he wrote the piece. (And who struggled hard in writing it. The struggle is audible in the music; the Ninth Symphony, taken as a whole, isn't so unequivocally joyous.)

The whole thing makes a Hallmark card look like Proust. Who's going to be impressed with language like this? Caramoor ought to be ashamed. As I read the paragraph I've quoted, I started to wonder whether there just might be a reverse Mozart effect. Maybe classical music makes us dumber. Meanwhile, if we believe Stephen Johnson's new book, pop culture gets smarter and smarter. Certainly the world is full of smart people who don't go to classical concerts. We need to attract them. But since they're savvy citizens of our current world, they're good at seeing through bullshit. What will they think when they read about the "joyous celebration"? They'll expect the performance to be as empty as the press release, and who could blame them?

"I am hoping you will consider this program for a **Listing, Review or Advance**," the e-mail concludes. (An "advance," for those who don't know the term, is an advance feature about the event. And by the way, what's up with all that boldface? Do they think we can't read?) But why should we do anything? What have they told us that's worth writing anything about? What's missing from the release -- not that I haven't said this before -- is anything with any substance, anything that might tell us why we ought to be interested. For instance:

Why hasn't Caramoor done the Ninth before?

Why are they doing it now?

What will Peter Oundjian try to do with the piece? What's his approach to it?

Of course, the e-mail isn't the full press release. So to be fair, I looked at what the full release said, and it's worse. It begins with what I've quoted, and then goes on with this eye-glazing tidbit:

Michael Barrett [more pointless boldface], Chief Executive and General Director of Caramoor said, "Caramoor's 60th anniversary is a good time for us to pay tribute to our founders, Walter and Lucie Rosen, and their incredibly generous and forward-thinking act of creating the Caramoor Festival. Occurring near the end of World War II, the gift of Caramoor to the public reflects the Rosen's unshakable belief in the power and future of music, and their confidence in the ennobling aspects of the human spirit. I think they would be very happy to see Caramoor continuing to flourish. As the Rosens were visionary in creating Caramoor, they were also advanced in their broad artistic and musical tastes. We will honor this legacy during the 2005 season, and in the years to come."

I'm sure the Rosens were fine people, but can't we be told something real about them?

(from my blog)