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SURFING THE WAVES OF POPULAR CULTURE
BY MICHAEL GILTZ & FRIENDS

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 05, 2007

Sufjan Stevens at BAM

Well, one definite goal was reached at the [Sufjan Stevens concert at BAM](#): we learned how to pronounce his name. It's Suf-e-yan, apparently. I've wanted to see him in concert for years, certainly since his brilliant album centered on the state of Illinois. But this was more than a concert. Stevens debuted his orchestral piece inspired by The BQE, [the Bronx Queens Expressway](#). There was a full orchestra, filled with the youngest, best-looking musicians you'll ever see in a pit. Since the music of Stevens is already very grand and orchestral, a symphony hardly seemed like a stretch and it certainly wasn't a surprise to see the performance included multi-media. It began with the orchestra behind a scrim, backlit to create a shadowy, lurking effect. Three giant video screens above it played stills and video shot along the BQE. Then the scrim lifted and there were the musicians, soon joined by five performers at the front of the stage who began to hula hoop. Why not? They left eventually (to delighted applause), the music continued and then they returned in darkness with glow in the dark neon hula hoops and danced some more. A rock band -- especially a full drum kit -- added a color I've rarely heard with an orchestra, there was a "Rhapsody in Blue" flourish on the keyboards towards the finale and it ended grandly. Accessible and enjoyable, the piece was most impressive for me during the quiet, almost sad lyrical passages at the beginning, perhaps because I didn't know if Stevens had that in him. The rest was filled with strong melodic sequences, often building to a dischordant epic climax before giving way to another strong melody. Very accessible and enjoyable (hence the Gershwin nod). I have no idea how the piece will stand up to repeated listening and whether it has the shape and cohesiveness of a symphony, whether it works as a whole. But I can't wait to hear it again. The multi-media portion was fine, something to watch while the music played, but it was far from necessary. This was not a multi-media work, it was a symphony with some images tossed in for good measure. That's a compliment.

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