

San Mateo County Times

May 15, 2007

Tackling tough material, California Youth Symphony soars

By Keith Kreitman,

I ONCE WROTE that the California Youth Symphony was "one of the best of the world's youth symphonies, certainly." That opinion is even more "certain" after hearing the ensemble's concert Sunday at the Flint Center for the Performing Arts in Cupertino.

The group was able to meet the challenge of music director Leo Eylar's programming of three compositions that could arouse a rebellion among adult performers in any regional professional symphony orchestras. Many professional orchestral directors would kill to get the brass sections of this youth orchestra, especially the French horns, the Achilles heels of almost every adult orchestra. Failing that, they would probably try to grab that richly mellow cello section. Now that I think about it, however, they would likely try to take the whole orchestra.

Eylar told the pre-concert audience that his violin soloist on the program, 16-year-old Zenas Hsu, performing Dmitri Shostakovich's "Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra," was the best he'd heard. I wouldn't go that far, but I would say the player is close to the best. No question about it, Hsu is a major talent. The Shostakovich is a profound work, not only technically and interpretively demanding but also runs the gamut from the slow and lyrical to finger-busting speed passages. The piece includes a deeply emotional Third Movement, a passacaglia, in which Hsu strives to tear your heart out and just about succeeds. What is most impressive about Hsu's performance is the maturity of his restraint and control and how he measures in even the pauses in a long cadenza. The true test of his maturity? He never uses his dazzling technique for pure show.

And the orchestra was close behind in execution, as they took on a very difficult "The Chairman Dances: Foxtrot for Orchestra" by the highly successful modern composer John Adams of Berkeley. This is technically so demanding in entrances, releases and pauses that one could see the strain upon the performers from the concentration needed to flawlessly execute the seemingly formless, random and interlocking phrases. I don't believe many professional organizations would undertake this one.

The final work was "Concerto for Orchestra" by the Hungarian-born Bela Bartok, another modernist, considered one of the great 20th-century composers. This is a work considered so demanding that it wasn't until the Chicago Symphony Orchestra took a crack at it in the early 1950s that it even entered the repertoire of the major symphony orchestras. And here were these teenagers effortlessly strolling through it. In programming the "Concerto for Orchestra," Eylar forgoes demonstrating the rich, full power of his whole ensemble. It is a five-movement work that lays bare the innards of the orchestra and gives almost all of those sections a crack at showing what it can do in open concerto style.

For more than 50 years we worried that serious music was a dying art in America, but these youngsters show that, in their hands, it is still alive and kicking, and they are making it even better with every performance. The concert repeats at the San Mateo Performing Arts Center on Sunday.