

Cal Symph's 20th season starts on a fun note

Mozart's Concerto for Two Pianos gives program's first half a markedly festive atmosphere

By Georgia Rowe
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THERE ARE TIMES when you want to make a profound musical statement and times when you want to simply let your hair down and party. The California Symphony opted for the latter approach Sunday afternoon at the Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts, with a splendid concert to launch its 20th-anniversary season.



Bob Pepping/Contra Costa Times

Conrad Tao, 12, left, and Peng Peng, 14, right, with the California Symphony in Walnut Creek.

Why not? The orchestra, which is thriving under music director Barry Jekowsky, has plenty to celebrate. Sunday's program -- the first of four scheduled for the 2006-07 season -- kicked off the anniversary in high spirits.

Jekowsky assembled an aptly ebullient program for the concert, which repeats tonight at 7:30. Mozart, John Williams and former California Symphony composer-in-residence Kevin Beavers all contributed light fare.

The program's one "serious" entry -- Brahms' Symphony No. 1 in C minor -- was reserved for the second half. Jekowsky led a gripping performance that seemed a celebration of the orchestra itself, with warm, expansive playing from the strings and shapely contributions from the brass and woodwinds. There was a fine sense of nobility in the work's famous finale.

But there was no denying the festive atmosphere of the program's first half, the centerpiece of which was Mozart's Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra in E flat. The work came across as an exuberant gambol for the orchestra and its two soloists, 14-year-old Peng Peng and 12-year-old Conrad Tao. Mozart, who has been celebrating an anniversary of his own this year, would have been pleased.

Jekowsky long ago established the tradition of presenting child prodigies, with young performers including Leila Josefowicz, Sarah Chang and Hilary Hahn appearing with the orchestra early in their careers. Sunday's performance by Peng and Tao demonstrated that the tradition continues to pay handsome dividends for the organization.

The two pianists approached their assignment with a winning mixture of crisp technique and youthful vigor; trading, doubling and echoing Mozart's lines with dazzling dexterity, they sailed through the good-natured score with tremendous aplomb. Jekowsky, who divided his strings for the performance, surrounded them with warm, well-defined sound.

For their encore, Peng and Tao played "Happy Birthday" as Mozart himself might have done -- in their own impetuous, heavily ornamented arrangement.

"Happy Birthday" also served as the subject for Williams' piece; the "Star Wars" composer's "Happy Birthday Variations" is a kind of humorous guide to the orchestra and, under Jekowsky's fleet direction, it made a cheerful curtain-raiser. Following it was Beavers' "Topsy," the first installment in a new work titled "Concerto for Orchestra," which will be co-written by four former California Symphony composers-in-residence. The complete work is scheduled to be unveiled at the end of the season, and Sunday's performance of Beavers' single movement made a tantalizing preview.

As its title suggests, Beavers' six-minute score celebrates mild inebriation; the piece starts with crisp pizzicato strings, joined by woodwinds in a woozy dance. Subsequent entrances by horns and percussion indicate there's a fine line between tipsy and drunk -- at one point, triangles pop up brazenly all over the orchestra -- but Beavers keeps it all in the spirit of fun. Jekowsky gave it a fittingly extroverted performance.
