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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

REVIEW

Despite taking Fifth (Beethoven's), orchestra acquits itself brilliantly

– Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

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Barry Jekowsky and the California Symphony include a full helping of new and unusual programming on their schedule, but they often have their most stirring successes in the standard repertoire. They did it again Sunday, when Beethoven's Fifth Symphony -- the warhorse of all warhorses -- emerged as the highlight of the orchestra's season-ending program at the Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek.

Conducting with lean, propulsive energy and a taste for the mysterious, Jekowsky gave the familiar work a measure of dark-hued glamour. This was hardly an innovative or different reading of the score, but it touched all the bases and produced a performance that was dramatically arresting.

The first movement combined a taut rhythmic profile with a robust orchestral sound to produce grand results, and the slow movement moved urgently forward on the strength of the blazing brass fanfares. The scherzo sounded a note of shadowy menace (these are the "goblins" conjured up so memorably by E.M. Forster in "Howards End"), and the low strings launched the trio section more clearly and crisply than I've heard it in a long time.

Though he acknowledged that Beethoven's Fifth needs no introduction, Jekowsky tried something a little different by prefacing the performance with a few excerpts from the composer's sketchbooks. Though it can be interesting to hear the roads not taken on the way to a finished masterpiece, the exercise would have worked better if Jekowsky had decided ahead of time what points he was trying to make, and prepared his remarks accordingly.

The program opened with "Les espaces infinis," a moody, lovely 10-minute meditation by former composer-in-residence Pierre Jalbert. The piece opens and closes with slow, sweet-toned clouds of string harmonies, punctuated in Mahlerian fashion by the harp. In between, these clouds coalesce into an emotionally charged upwelling before dissipating again, creating a simple, satisfying arc. The performance was aptly tender and sensitive.

Nor was star power neglected, as violinist Sarah Chang returned to give a vigorous, rather scrappy account of Dvorák's Violin Concerto. Chang's career has traced a bumpy path since her heyday as a child prodigy -- she made a triumphant debut with the California Symphony in 1991, at the age of 9 -- and Sunday's performance represented neither her best recent outing nor her worst.

She tackled the quick outer movements with a will, racing through them in a manner that was sometimes exciting and sometimes rather slapdash. The songful slow movement projected some of the requisite serenity.

California Symphony: The program repeats at 7:30 p.m. today at the Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts, Walnut Creek. Tickets: \$37-\$57. Call (925) 943-7469 or go to www.californiasymphony.org

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