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Concert long on atmosphere

By Georgia Rowe
TIMES CORRESPONDENT

High-octane soloists aside, the measure of an orchestra is always in the relationship between the conductor and members of the ensemble. Sunday afternoon in the Hofmann Theatre of the Regional Center for the Arts, Barry Jekowsky and the California Symphony demonstrated that their 18-year partnership is not only healthy, but continuing to mature.

The program, which featured music by Beethoven, Dvorak and Pierre Jalbert -- as well as an appearance by violinist Sarah Chang -- is the final offering of the orchestra's 18th season. It repeats tonight at the Regional Center.

Each piece on the program had its own attractions, but the second half's dynamic performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C minor found the conductor and his orchestra in particularly fine form.

Finding the thrills in Beethoven's Fifth isn't as easy as it sounds. Audiences don't usually come to the composer's evergreen score for surprises, or even new insight. (Jekowsky's usually enlightening pre-performance remarks seemed somewhat extraneous this time.)

Still, one had to be delighted by the sense of spontaneity in Jekowsky's traversal of the work. There was genuine excitement -- as well as an admirable sense of unity and precision -- in this performance. The first movement's famous opening theme came across with plenty of power; the conductor imparted a sense of leisurely grace to the Andante. The Scherzo was expertly calibrated and brilliantly colored, and the Finale sounded magnificently rich and weighty.

Sunday's concert also marked a homecoming of sorts with the appearance of Chang, an artist who has been closely associated with the California Symphony. Jekowsky has introduced many youthful talents over the years, but perhaps none with the star power of the Korean-American violinist. Chang, who made her professional debut with this orchestra at age 9, is now in her early 20s. She's gone on to a major career, and she made a welcome return as the soloist in Dvorak's Violin Concerto in A minor.

Chang hasn't entirely divested herself of the mannerisms that were evident

in some of her earliest Bay Area appearances. Her playing takes on a forced quality in difficult passages, and she tends to substitute volume for finesse. But the tone is firm and incisive, and she brought an abundance of energy to the lively folk themes at the heart of Dvorak's score.

For this listener, the afternoon's greatest reward came in the orchestra's luminous performance of Jalbert's "Les espaces infinis" (The infinite spaces). Jalbert, who was the California Symphony's composer-in-residence from 1999 to 2002, has written several impressive works for this ensemble (the first, "In Aeternam," went on to win the BBC Masterprize). Commissioned by the Albany Symphony Orchestra, which premiered it in 2001, this piece offers further evidence of his gifts.

As the title suggests, "Les espaces infinis" conveys a feeling of spaciousness. The strings begin it with a series of falling chords, and the woodwinds follow; the composer draws the listener along, introducing a tender melody for violin (played with great sensitivity by concertmaster Roy Malan) and echoing it throughout the orchestra (most notably in the burnished sound of principal cellist Paul Hale). The atmosphere continues to thicken, with a forceful entry by the brass, until it recedes again into silence.

Jalbert writes beautifully for the orchestra, and although his music always seems to brim with ideas, his greatest strength may be his use of restraint. This is a piece that invites a second listening, and under Jekowsky's poised leadership, it made an irresistible curtain-raiser.

CONCERT REVIEW

- WHO: Violinist Sarah Chang and the California Symphony
- WHAT: Music by Beethoven, Dvorak and Pierre Jalbert
- WHERE: Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts, Civic Drive at Locust Street, Walnut Creek
- WHEN: 7:30 tonight
- HOW MUCH: \$20-\$59
- CONTACT: 925-943-SHOW