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Violinist boldly goes for broke

By Georgia Rowe

TIMES CORRESPONDENT

IF THERE'S A COMMON fault among today's young classical musicians, it's a tendency to conservatism. In the endless quest for perfect technique, individual expression is often sacrificed, and the result is a bland kind of precision across the board.

None of that for Lara St. John, who was the soloist for Sunday afternoon's California Symphony concert at the Dean Lesher Regional Center for the Arts. For better or worse, the Canadian violinist takes an aggressively individual approach.

Joining the orchestra in Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35, St. John gave a bold, go-for-broke performance. This was not your typically polite reading of a Romantic war horse. The concert, which also featured Beethoven's Symphony No. 2 and "Blue Cathedral" by contemporary American composer Jennifer Higdon, repeats tonight.

Tall, blond and lanky, St. John looks as though she'd be just as comfortable on a tennis court as the concert platform. Sunday, she launched into Tchaikovsky's concerto with vigor and athletic assurance. If a measure of subtlety was occasionally lost in the process, the violinist more than made up for it in energy and interpretive fire.

Vulgar no more

Of course, Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto has never been known for its refinement. It shocked audiences and critics alike at its first performance in 1881; one critic condemned its "vulgarity," noting that the violin was "tugged about, torn, beaten black and blue." History has taken a kinder view, and what was once considered unacceptable about the score is now embraced.

St. John and conductor Barry Jekowsky played the work for maximum thrills, taking the beguilingly Romantic melody that opens the first movement at a brisk pace. Despite a few episodes of questionable string tone, St. John stayed on the tightrope throughout the movement's hairpin turns. She played the cadenza with considerable brio.

The central Canzonetta sounded lovely, particularly in the give-and-take between St. John and the orchestra's woodwinds. The rowdy, folk-inspired finale offered further opportunity for virtuoso display.

Red-blooded Beethoven

The excitement continued after intermission, as Jekowsky led a red-blooded performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 2. The conductor, who is currently midway through his 19th season as California Symphony's music director, has forged a solid bond with his ensemble, and it paid off handsomely in his weighty, rhythmically secure traversal of this familiar masterpiece.

The program opened with Higdon's "Blue Cathedral." Commissioned by the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, the work is a tone poem dedicated to the composer's brother, who died at age 33.

The performance evoked both the melancholy of loss and a sense of peaceful acceptance. The score starts quietly with the soft, floating sounds of chimes and strings, then seems to open as wide as the sky itself.

There's a graceful interlude for woodwinds -- Higdon started her career as a flutist, and her brother was a clarinetist -- followed by a denser stretch of writing for multiple instruments. Eventually, the calm of the introduction returns, and the work ends with the ethereal sounds of glass instruments and Chinese bells.

It was easy to hear why Jekowsky chose the piece: Higdon's harmonic writing recalls both Copland and Lou Harrison, two composers the conductor has programmed often. Sunday, he led an enveloping performance -- one that was both a poignant farewell to a beloved brother and a beautiful opening for the music still to come.

CONCERT REVIEW

- WHO: The California Symphony, with violinist Lara St. John
- WHAT: Works by Tchaikovsky, Beethoven and Jennifer Higdon
- WHERE: Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts, Civic Drive and Locust Street, Walnut Creek
- WHEN: 7:30 tonight
- HOW MUCH: \$20-\$59
- CONTACT: 925-943-SHOW, www.dlrca.org