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Obscure Pieces Shine in Santa Fe

By D.S. Crafts - October 26, 2009

There used to be a classical music radio program in San Francisco called “UBF — Unfamiliar Works by Familiar Composers.” Sunday's concert by the Santa Fe Pro Musica would have been a natural for that broadcast.

More importantly, the three works were given stellar performances by the Pro Musica hosting guest pianist Joel Fan, who appeared in Albuquerque only a few months ago. Quintets for Piano and Winds by Mozart and Beethoven joined Schubert's Variations on “Trockne Blumen” for Piano and Flute on the stage of the St. Francis Auditorium.

Fan is one of the bright young stars of the piano, whose prowess as a soloist was amply demonstrated in his highly eclectic Albuquerque recital. Here he showed a penchant for chamber music, eagerly stepping into the spotlight when called upon, yet supporting or blending with the other instruments superbly. He seemed to be enjoying the collaborative experience immensely, even conducting the page-turner at one point.

The Mozart quintet calls for oboe, clarinet, French horn and bassoon, along with the piano. In some ways, the work might be considered a concerto, with winds substituting for strings. Yet there is more of the intimacy of chamber music than in most concertos. Certainly Mozart's many previous Wind Serenades inform the highly characteristic writing. From the opening largo the sense of ensemble was most apparent — five partners in animated conversation.

Schubert's Variations of “Trockne Blumen” (Faded Flowers) explores the possibilities of a song he had composed for his Die schone Mullerin (Fair Maid of the Mill) song cycle. The original song is one of the most tragic and depressing of the set, but, notwithstanding the minor key, there is little of that spirit in the Variations. The work is clearly a bravura showpiece for flute, though not just a showpiece for its own sake. The tune doesn't just go through the standard kinds of permutations, but rather it's as though Schubert thinks the melody anew for each variation.

Flutist Carol Redman was simply terrific. After having heard her in various contexts and with various ensembles over the past several years, that came as no surprise. Highly dramatic though never flamboyant, with a beauty of tone, myriad colors and intelligent musicianship, she gave a reading that one would be hard-pressed to better. Fan, too, imbued the work with the depth of meaning Schubert put into it.

Beethoven's Quintet for Piano and Winds uses the same scoring as the Mozart quintet. It is an early work and, while the opening allegro is somewhat sterner and even more symphonic in character, much of the middle andante cantabile movement could easily be mistaken for Mozart. The rondo came off with spirits as playful as Mozart at his most mischievous, yet still revealing something of Beethoven's more imposing nature.

What a treat to experience first-rate performances of these rarely heard masterpieces.