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PRO MUSICA GUEST SHOWS PIANO ATHLETICISM

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“Bizarre.” That was how one contemporaneous reviewer described the first performance of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 2, the work that opened the program Saturday night for the Santa Fe Pro Musica Chamber Orchestra. How interesting it would be to hear the piece through the sensibilities of those who called it “absurd” or “a rampantly wild and writhing dragon that does not want to die.”

Supposedly among the evennumbered “neglected” symphonies, the work was a product of Beethoven’s early period, when he was not so much challenging the form as putting into it all the inspired rambunctiousness of his youth. The work seems carefree and jocund despite his having just written the heart-breaking “Heiligenstadt Testament” in which he attempts to come to terms with his inevitably increasing deafness and alienation from the world. The few dark moments are more due to musical development and variation than to heart-on-theseeve autobiography.

Conductor Thomas O’Connor led the ensemble deftly and with potency through the four-movement work. The rising figure on winds in the first movement was boisterously echoed by the orchestra, and the pace became brisk. The Scherzo, crisp and lively, parodies a country dance. The Mozartean mischievous of the final movement came to a climax with several playfully false endings -- (“the dragon that does not want to die”)?

Pianist Joel Fan is perhaps known more for his association with Yo-Yo Ma’s Silk Road Project than for his performances of standard repertory, despite a performance with the New York Philharmonic at age 11. He took the stage of the Lensic Performing Arts Center to perform Chopin’s Concerto in e minor, of the most difficult concertos in the repertoire.

It has long been debated whether Chopin wrote this work for piano and string quartet, or that he performed the work in that form for lack of a full orchestra. For this performance, the Pro Musica Chamber Orchestra chose to use the string quartet arrangement, but to give it to their full-string complement plus double bass. As such, this performance constitutes the premiere -- at least the United States premiere of the work in this form.

The piano first enters like the star attraction that has just been given the most flattering and effusive introduction. Fan’s jovial demeanor informed the entire character of the reading, resulting in a cheerful outpouring of Romantic sentiment.

The beautiful theme of the Romance-Larghetto that Chopin described as “like dreaming in beautiful springtime by moonlight” came out lusciously over the soft bed of the string accompaniment.

The finale movement is as boisterous as Chopin, the supreme lyric poet of the piano, ever got. Despite being based on the Krakowiak, a Polish stomping dance, the movement never loses the grace and refinement that are the hallmark of his style. With seeming ease Fan spun forth the many exotic and elaborate figurations of the theme, as the left hand is given some difficult trill-like figurations that complement the righthand theme. The variations ultimately culminated in flawless cascades of pianistic athleticism.