



DOUBLE AND TRIPLE DELIGHT

BY B.A. NILSSON - JANUARY 20, 2006

Albany Symphony Orchestra, Yo-Yo Ma
Palace Theatre, Jan. 20

There was no better example of the rapport among cellist Yo-Yo Ma and the trio of musicians who performed with him in Albany than their encore, the slow movement from Brahms's Piano Quartet No. 3. Like the other works on the program, it featured the cello, but, this being the work of Brahms, once the other instruments kicked in, the byplay was sinuous and rich and the players—violinists Jonathan Gandelman and Colin Jacobsen (the latter on viola for this work) and pianist Joel Fan—could have played an evening's worth of this stuff and I would have been delighted.

On the other hand, has there ever been a major symphony orchestra concert before that featured both Brahms's Double Concerto and Beethoven's Triple Concerto? It's rare enough to hear one of them, what with the price of soloists these days, but I suspect that this pairing is unprecedented. With Yo-Yo Ma as the headliner, it also verges on the unbelievable, but it's a mark of his rapport with the Albany Symphony and conductor David Alan Miller (he's performed with them twice before) that he chose them—and us—to receive this bounty.

The concert opened with the latest in the American Memories series of new works that were commissioned to be performed throughout the season. To Poestenkill is a short, evocative work by Chinese-born Bun-Ching Lam, now living in Vermont and New York. As she explained, the piece is intended to capture a cycle of seasons at her summer home, which it does through an accomplished use of orchestral texture. Following a stormy, percussion-rich intro, we settled into an autumnal landscape of strings. Spring was introduced with a cello solo, nicely played (and reinforcing the theme of the evening), and led into a harmonious finish that resolved the tension otherwise informing the work.

Speaking of tension: Brahms sullied a decades-long friendship with violinist Joseph Joachim by sticking up for Joachim's wife during an angry divorce. As a reconciliation gesture, Brahms wrote a concerto for violin, cello, and orchestra that premiered in 1887. The Double Concerto opens with a sweeping cello cadenza, and Ma, who seems to be at home with any kind of music, was its master, his gorgeous tone filling the hall as he set the pace for a rich, romantic experience.

Violinist Jacobsen—like the other soloists, a part of Ma's Silk Road Project for the last few years—was the cellist's equal, which is vital for this piece. Although it couldn't be a more Brahmsian piece, there's a Baroque-style interplay between the violin and cello, accented with harmonized trills and runs that keep it lively. The slow movement features one of the composer's most endearing ballad themes (it served a soap opera once upon a time), and both orchestra and soloists were at top form in making it work. There's an obvious *simpatico* between Ma and Miller, and the players were giving their best, blending into what seems to be a single organism, thinking and breathing and singing as one.

Both of these big concertos finish with a lively, dance-like rondo, something to kick up the heels after the solemn middle movement. In Beethoven's case, his Triple Concerto has only a token slow movement before the dancing begins. It's the least of the composer's several concertos, a work that is relentlessly amiable and yet one that never hits the heights of, say, the violin concerto. It's nevertheless a treat, and has inspired a slew of recent recordings, and it makes a fascinating contrast in concert with the concerto by Brahms.

To write convincingly for a trio of soloists again harkens to the Baroque, in particular Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5. Often the keyboard is pitted against the strings, so to speak, with call-and-response passages or to develop an idea. Pianist Fan was superb, his sense of timing a delight as he aced through the filigree of Beethoven's long lines without rushing and with a keen sense of the wit the music warrants. Likewise, violinist Gandelsman clearly knew his way through the style of the composer, although he ran into a few bowing problems with some of the humoresque passages.

Not surprisingly, the concert packed the Palace and the audience rose with delight at its conclusion.