

The Pueblo Chieftain

November 5, 2006

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Pueblo Symphony 'Rachs'; Fan rolls

Though the Pueblo Symphony's "Rach and Roll" presentation Saturday evening, with guest pianist Joel Fan, didn't include flaming keyboards a la Jerry Lewis, it was as close as classical music gets.

Colorado State University-Pueblo's Hoag Hall welcomed a nearly full house for three pieces spanning more than a century, featuring one of the most celebrated young piano phenoms of the present day.

As is customary, the symphony warmed patrons up, this time with the overture from Rossini's "Barber of Seville." A toe-tapping crowd-pleaser, the piece also exposed the challenges of introducing so many new members to the symphony this year. There were moments in the faster staccato sections where the violins would spread a bit thin and the percussionists would try to run off with the tempo. As always, conductor Jacob Chi wrangled everything back into place for a satisfying summation.

The second piece was Schubert's evocative Symphony No. 8 in B minor, also known as the "Unfinished." This is because it contains only two movements instead of the traditional three or four. Terse or not, Schubert packs plenty into this composition, brimming with stark dynamic contrasts and chilling melodies. I was especially pleased that this piece features the cello and double bass sections, who get the rare opportunity to introduce and revisit the ominous melodic theme. Though carrying the symphony can be a challenge for the lower-register instruments, our symphony presented a delightfully robust interpretation.

I don't know much about film score giant John Williams and his influences, but I'd lay odds that he is a big fan of Franz Schubert. Famous for his hundreds of songs written before an untimely death at age 31, Schubert was a craftsman of memorable and affecting tunes, ideal for Pueblo's own highly emotive conductor. If you didn't know any better, you'd swear you had heard some of Schubert's timeless melodies in more contemporary cinematic settings.

Speaking of film, everyone has had those moments when you're watching a movie and you become so absorbed in the moment that you actually forget you're simply an observer. The hypnotic virtuosity of Joel Fan tackling what is arguably one of

the most difficult piano concertos ever composed provided just such an experience. There were times when I

became so lost amid Fan's rendition of Sergei Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor that I not only forgot about the room in which I was sitting; I forgot about the rest of the symphony.

Before anyone mistakes this for criticism, please understand that in such a concerto, it's the symphony's role to lift up the soloist, while taking nothing away from the showcase. In particular, this concerto suggests Rachmaninov either had an obsessive love for piano, or he really hated pianists. The content of the piano part is absolutely punishing, to the point that most performers would not be stupid or brazen enough to even try playing it.

Joel Fan, however, is neither of these. He offered the single most exhilarating musical performance I've ever seen in Pueblo. The wonder of his playing is not only in his technical expertise. Fan demonstrates an emotional sophistication that digs deeply into Rachmaninov's own musical soul, spilling the guts of the work out on the stage, leaving nothing behind but viscera and a stunned, grateful audience.

I suppose we should expect no less from a young man whose debut with the New York Philharmonic was at age 11, and who has demonstrated mastery not only of every period of symphonic music, but of most mainstream popular styles, as well. Perhaps even more important is that Joel Fan is a swell guy. He has a heart of gold, and if you didn't know he was one of the finest pianists alive, you'd want to grab him by the neck and give him a noogie.

Fan offered master classes to high school and college students while in town, and he met adoring fans over pizza on Friday. He hung around in the lobby after the concert, shaking hands and signing CDs. He's just the kind of guy who you'd want to be your buddy.

Thank goodness he's not as nice to pianos as he is to the rest of the community, or we'd all be missing out on a truly precious musical gift.



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