

YO-YO MA AND FRIENDS AMAZE YOUNG AND OLD

BY MATT EZOVSKI - STAFF REVIEWER

JANUARY 25, 2006

For those of you who do not know, Yo-Yo Ma is one of the most respected and internationally recognizable faces of classical music performance today. He is generally considered to be the predominant cellist of our time, and he travels the world with ease and enthusiasm. From his more than 50 albums and 15 Grammy awards to performances on staples of pop culture like the NBC television series “The West Wing,” he has transcended the boundaries of music today.

Last Friday night, the Albany Symphony Orchestra took the stage with Yo-Yo Ma and Friends—including violinists Colin Jacobsen and Jonathan Gandelsman, as well as pianist Joel Fan—at Albany’s Palace Theatre. The hall was packed, and quite an astonishing range of ages was represented. Before the anxious crowd would meet the star of the show, though, a small woman from Macao, a small principality near Hong Kong, would get the opportunity to light up like a star.

In the spirit of the four seasons that are such a part of the hills of Rensselaer County, composer Bun Ching Lam wrote “To Poestenkill,” which the Albany Symphony premiered as part of Friday’s event. Though modern in feel and lacking distinct harmonies, the active listener could discern images of the various seasons Lam instructed us to listen for. I wouldn’t think it unlikely that we will hear a performance of “To Poestenkill” at an EMPAC event in the future.

After thunderous applause for Lam, Ma and Jacobsen took the stage to perform Brahms’ “Double Concerto in A Minor, Opus 102” with the symphony. The first thing I noticed about Ma’s performance style was his sound quality and workmanship with a bow. Once I got beyond these more obvious features, however, it became quite clear that he performed with extreme ease. He smiled, bobbed, and weaved with the melodies. He would flash the occasional grin at Jacobsen or Conductor David Alan Miller, but the quality and musicality never changed.

A lengthy intermission followed the Brahms, during which a Steinway grand piano was moved onto the stage. Gandelsman replaced Jacobsen as the violinist, and Fan assumed his seat at the ivories. The trio proceeded to again amaze the audience with the help of the orchestra through its performance of Beethoven’s “Triple Concerto in C Major, Opus 56.” Coming from someone who has seen a great deal of Beethoven in his day, it certainly qualifies as a classic, repetitive piece. This time, however, the specter of Ma was deflected by Fan, who gave one of the most spectacular performances of the night.

At the completion of the Beethoven, and following several rounds of audience applause, Jacobsen, this time performing on viola, rejoined the Ma, Gandelsman, and Fan for an encore quartet performance which, in this listener’s view, was the most impressive of the evening. Unannounced and unnamed, the final piece accentuated the musicality of the ensemble.

All in all, it was an amazing evening of music not to be forgotten.