

San Bernardino Symphony tackles challenging works

10:00 PM PST on Wednesday, November 17, 2010

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Special to The Press-Enterprise

The San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra's audience members enjoyed a rare opportunity to enrich their enjoyment of music as the orchestra offered two unfamiliar works book-ending a work of very friendly listening.

Conductor Carlo Ponti invited the audience to "kindly open your mind" for the opening work, Carlos Chavez's Symphony No. 5.

Plunging into unfamiliar works takes courage, because neither the listeners nor the musicians come with a positive comfort level. Will the musicians perform the new music confidently and aggressively? Will the audience accept it willingly? Much is at stake.

Ponti's foray into potential musical quicksand yielded a relatively safe landing. Composed for strings only, the Chavez work thrived with the musicians' sincere approach as they successfully tackled technical challenges of repeated very high notes, inharmonics, and rhythmic shifts.

The other unfamiliar bookend, Carl Nielsen's Symphony No. 1, presented a pleasant venue for the orchestra to make fine music. It meandered from harmonic and busy strings to peaceful winds in the first movement to moody wistfulness in the second, and third and fourth movements that produced a bland sameness of sound. Perhaps the piece with its seemingly infinite details required intense, academic listening for real enjoyment.

Poured into the middle, Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 2, as performed by pianist Angela Cholakyan, offered ear-comforting and mind-soothing listening. Absolutely impeccable in her execution of quick and extravagant runs and arpeggios, Cholakyan gave a nice, bright finish to the piano sound. She delivered a beautifully artistic second movement, with an approach more sensitive than in the first and second movements, as if caressing the keys. With a lovely ease to her playing, she performed with grace so the notes seemed to float and glide from the piano.

The orchestra, perhaps taking their cue from Cholakyan, neatly shaped and crafted the phrases to create a lovely and flowing sound.

Still, the concerto left me craving more -- more finesse, more sincerity, more definition, more contrast from both the pianist and the orchestra.