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Marvelous Mozart at Basilica of St. Joseph

PIANO SOLOIST SHINES IN FESTIVAL'S OPENING CONCERT

By Richard Scheinin

Police sirens, car horns, the revving of macho motorcycle engines on Market Street - none of it could upset the marvelous, almost mystical, Mozart concert that happened Thursday night inside the Cathedral Basilica of St. Joseph in downtown San Jose.

It was opening night of the 33rd annual Midsummer Mozart Festival, and conductor George Cleve, the festival's founder, created a nearly perfect little Mozart world inside the lofty and reverberant church. Assisted by exceptional soloists and a first-rate orchestra, Cleve was busy creating an illusion, even as the noise from Market Street occasionally bled into the sanctuary: that we live in a world of balance and well-being.

The program, which travels to Sonoma and Berkeley this weekend, was neatly divided between familiar and not-so-often-heard works, cresting in the first half with the Piano Concerto No. 22, all majesty and grace, and at the end with Symphony No. 34, which balanced storm and tranquility. It all emerged ego-free, a team effort, in which the 30-plus performers seemed equally in love with the music. What more can you ask for?

I know that some people at Thursday's concert would have preferred a different venue: St. Joseph is an echo chamber, and I heard complaints about the lack of definition in the orchestra's sound as it bounced around the big circular sanctuary.

But, for me at least, it worked. As the all-Mozart program started, I was seated almost halfway back and thought the orchestra's performance was enhanced, in a way, by all that reverb, which attached itself to the music like a soft, mossy patina.

The Divertimento No. 11 in D major, K. 251, for Oboe, Two Horns and Strings had a charmed sound: Those long-beamed notes from the horns became an axis around which the music revolved; oboist Laura Griffith's solo passages were pungent and clear.

Still, some detail was lost in the over-lushness of the acoustics so, pretending I was at the ballpark, I snuck up to the front rows and, luckily, found myself with a clear view of the keyboard as soloist Janina Fialkowska came out to perform the Piano Concerto No. 22 in E-flat major, K. 482.

She is remarkable. Long known for her interpretations of Chopin and Liszt, especially, her career hit a roadblock in 2002 when a lump was found in her left arm - a rare and aggressive cancer. Radiation was used to shrink the tumor, then surgery, unavoidably removing portions of muscle. In a radical muscle-transfer procedure, a muscle from her back was re-routed to her limp left arm.

Gradually she has recovered. Her performance Thursday was delicately rippled, dappled and elegant. Her touch is firm, her phrasing refined. During the first movement, her hands moved like soft-purring engines and, at the close of her cadenza, she and Cleve exchanged contented smiles.

The music enamored: Her notes fell like rich droplets in the restful Andante, the second movement, which offered a spotlight exchange between two songbirds in the background, flutist Maria Tamburrino and bassoonist Rufus Olivier.

There were two or three instances when Cleve and his players had trouble coordinating tempos. But mostly, the orchestra played with crisp spirit and full, resounding sound, responding to Cleve's clear, minimal gestures, which achieved a maximum effect. The guy, as he has shown for years, has the touch for Mozart.

Olivier, the next soloist, brought jocularly, sensitivity and a virtuoso's athleticism to bear on the Bassoon Concerto in B-flat major, K. 191. He performs with a swagger, and what comes out of his instrument is all refinement. There was steady, dexterous, cross-registral motion, from the basement to the tower of the bassoon, with delicacy of tone, when needed, or, at other times, a huge plummy sound, which Olivier played with, letting it echo and decay during cadenzas.

When car horns began blasting away, midway through his second-movement cadenza, Olivier just looked bemused. He smiled and kept going.

This very special concert finished with Symphony No. 34 in C major, K. 338. Cleve, gesturing more forcefully and expansively, led a performance marked by clarity and nuance, balance and a keen sense of alertness. The orchestra seemed to have gone into "the zone." Mozart was speaking through it to us.