

Sheng Cai with the Windsor Symphony

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Franz and Cai wow Friday audiences

Windsor Star 2/1/2013

Ted Shaw Feb 01, 2013 - 6:00 PM EDT

Last but certainly not least among the candidates vying for the post of music director with the Windsor Symphony, Robert Franz completed the cycle of auditions with a flourish Friday at concerts at Assumption University Chapel.

He was helped in his efforts by the performance of young Chinese-Canadian pianist Sheng Cai. ‘Limited resources don’t mean limited choice, and Franz chose works that brought out the best in the orchestra.’

The two paired up for Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 24, considered by many as the apotheosis of the classical art form. Franz, the eighth and final candidate to replace John Morris Russell, was poised and confident in leading the orchestra through a varied program of music from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.

The highlight naturally was the Mozart, but Franz framed the famous concerto with lesser known works, including a Canadian composition by the late Malcolm Forsyth. The nearly capacity audience at the morning concert Friday had come to hear the Mozart, and they weren’t disappointed.

Born in China, Cai emigrated to Toronto with his family when he was 11 and almost immediately began to turn heads, winning competition after competition. He was the youngest ever to win both the Toronto and

the Montreal symphony piano contests. He is currently studying with the renowned Gary Graffman, a mark of distinction in itself.

His playing was punctuated with big, tomato-ripe notes and gorgeously shaped passage work. The reflective second movement showed great sensitivity, but he no less impressive in the third movement variations which alternate between turbulence and calm.

His encore was equally thrilling on a smaller scale — The Lark, by 19th century Russian composer Alexei Balakirev.

Franz, meanwhile, demonstrated his keen understanding of the limitations of a smaller ensemble. Limited resources don’t mean limited choice, and Franz chose works that brought out the best in the orchestra. The second half consisted of two 20th century compositions — Malcolm Forsyth’s rapturous Valley of a Thousand Hills, a memoir of his youth in South Africa; and a lovely English pastoral work by Malcolm Arnold, Sinfonietta No. 2. The Arnold work featured principal flutist Jean-Francois Rompre in solos during the first and second movements. University of Windsor music professor Nicholas Papador provided the various percussion embellishments in the Forsyth work. The concert began with Rossini’s mid-19th century overture, La scala di seta (The Silk Ladder), rarely performed but a tasty appetizer for what was to come.



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