

Sheng Cai

"a brilliant young pianist"

'Old warhorse' a stallion in young hands

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A brilliant young pianist, a soothing string-orchestra interlude and a sweeping symphonic outpouring rewarded a Kamloops Symphony audience Saturday.

Nordic Sojourn, highlighting the music of Scandinavian composers such as Edvard Grieg and Jean Sibelius, ushered in the symphony's 35th season on a Romantic note.

None of these composers appeals as broadly as their Classical predecessors Beethoven and Mozart, yet it was still surprising to see the Sagebrush only two-thirds full for the first performance of the 2011-2012 program (not including the singular Dick Dickens Legacy Concert last month).

Too much Romantic music, too much unrestrained emotion for one evening, perhaps? A shame. Empty seats were missed opportunities. This concert, after all, represents the reunion of a community of patrons with musicians, many of whom have grown to know each other through the decades. It's a worthwhile evening, and then, of course, there's the music.

A full orchestra opened with Johan Svendsen's Norwegian Rhapsody No. 3, Op. 21, set the tone with a nod to the rise of nationalism that inspired Nordic composers a century or more ago.

Song Without Words by Canadian composer Christiann Venter, was the contemporary standout of the concert yet it fit gracefully within the context of the others. A smaller string orchestra teased a sublime moment or two from the short, lyrical piece, an homage to Felix Mendelssohn's Songs Without Words?

Edvard Grieg's Concerto for Piano Op. 16 in A Minor is considered a staple among pianists, often described as an old "warhorse" along the lines of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Sheng Cai, a Shanghai-

born Canadian pianist gave it a fresh sparkle, his hands seeming to float effortlessly over the keys in quieter moments, his whole body quaking with force during strident parts.

Seldom do guest performers step outside of the program, but Cai wasn't shy as he bowed to a standing ovation.

"Well, why not?" he said affably before sitting back down to play an encore.

He was tempted to perform a Liszt rhapsody to punctuate the concerto, but felt it was better to contrast the mood of the concerto with Sergei Rachmaninoff's sombre Elegie in E-flat minor.

Over the past 10 years, the KSO has on several occasions returned to the music of Finnish composer Jean Sibelius. Performances included that of his best-known work, Finlandia (2001), Swan of Tuonela (2008), and symphonies No. 3 and No. 6 in the last couple of seasons.

Sibelius' Symphony No. 1, though, fell a little short of expectations. Whether this was due to its interpretation, complexity or just a lack of familiarity on the part of this listener, I'm not sure. Einojuhani Rautavaara's third symphony was originally programmed but the sheet music wasn't available, evidently.

The next KSO date is one equally anticipated: Music in the Round, a fundraiser and first performance in Irving K. Barber Centre at TRU on Friday, Nov. 4.

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