

Violinist Zhu joins mentor Entremont at Boca Symphonia



Written by Greg Stepanich on 01 December 2012.

The Violin Concerto of Robert Schumann was written in the fall of 1853, at the end of the composer's productive life, and only in 1937, more than 80 years after it was composed, did it get its first performance.

It's one of the young Chinese-born violinist Dan Zhu's favorite concertos, and deep in the recesses of YouTube he can be seen playing it with the Schleswig-Holstein Festival Orchestra under the baton of Christoph Eschenbach.

"It's still not been recognized by the majority and (it's) much underrated," Zhu wrote of the concerto last week in an email message as he flew from his hometown of Beijing to Paris. "I think the music itself is very emotional, through ... breathtakingly beautiful themes, but also expressed in such (a) ... complex way.

"I was very fortunate to play this concerto with Maestro Eschenbach, who has guided me to insight of this music from his expertise (in) Schumann's late piano works, and we shared the same understanding and approach to this concerto."

Eschenbach has been an important mentor for Zhu, who will be the first guest soloist of the new season for the Boca Raton Symphonia. Perhaps one day he'll return with the Schumann, but this weekend he's playing a far better-known concerto by a friend of Schumann, the Violin Concerto (in E minor, Op. 64) of Felix Mendelssohn. Zhu first played the work at age 9 in his hometown of Beijing, and it's a piece that continues to offer him new musical insight.

"I have grown together with this piece over the years," Zhu wrote. "Like all masterpieces, every time when I re-study the piece, the music itself always offers so much for me to discover, endless layers to unfold." It's "perfectly written for the soloist and orchestra," he wrote, and its three movements develop like "a classic love story."

Also on the program at the Roberts Theater on the campus of the St. Andrew's School west of Boca Raton is an unfairly neglected American work, Walter Piston's *Sinfonietta*, plus Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Springsuite* and the overture to Rossini's early spoof, *Il Signor Bruschino*.

The concert will be directed by the Symphonia's director, French pianist Philippe Entremont, who first heard Zhu audition for the summer session at the Fontainebleau academy and invited him to perform the Brahms Violin Concerto with him and the Orchestre National de France about 10 years ago.

"Since then we have collaborated, not only in concerto performances and tours, but also in duo recitals and chamber music, including recording French sonatas," Zhu wrote. "I have admired his artistry through his

recordings with Bernstein, Ormandy, Szell, etc., since my childhood. He has given me precious advice from his experience and wisdom each time.”

Zhu studied at the Central Conservatory in Beijing, where one of his classmates was the pianist Lang Lang. He came to the United States at age 16 to study with the Canadian violinist Lucie Robert at what is now called Mannes College The New School for Music. Zhu said his experience at the Central Conservatory was valuable. “It was a very competitive environment. Most of us were very disciplined and motivated with learning and practicing, which are the important qualities to have when you are young, and it certainly gave me a solid foundation to my career and musical development later,” he wrote.

But he said the focus in Beijing was on individual training, and he felt the need to work with other musicians. “Music without sharing is not creative and expressive anymore; it only becomes silent and empty. Fortunately, I went to New York to continue my studies ... it helped me to expand my vision as a complete musician.”

Now based in New York, the 30-year-old Zhu divides his time equally among three continents: America, Asia and Europe. He’s won prizes at the Reine Elizabeth and Montreal competitions, and given recitals at the Salle Gaveau, Weill Recital Hall and Washington’s National Gallery of Art. He said he is discussing several recording projects with Entremont (with whom he recorded the Franck Violin Sonata in a 2007 disc on the Swiss label Cascavelle) and Eschenbach.

Zhu also is a devotee of the New York-based high-end couture house, Blanc de Chine, and wears its concert attire, which he says “enlightens” his performances. The house’s founder, Kin Yeung, is a “big fan of Schubert’s music,” Zhu wrote, and met the violinist during his first Chinese concert tour.

Yueng’s brand is designed with ancient Chinese philosophies such as Taoism in mind. “All Blanc de Chine collections follow the eight design elements of simplicity, serenity, harmony, purity, subtlety, sensuality, functionality and comfort,” according to the promotional copy on its Website.

Zhu said the brand is more than “just a high-end fashion line.”

“The philosophy and concepts behind their designs stand on their own ... when you see their collection, you feel like you are at an art exhibition,” Zhu wrote. “Like a masterpiece of music, each cloth has its own soul and story.”

The violin scene today is highly competitive, but not more than it was in the golden age of the great soloists in the early 20th century, Zhu wrote. “The most important quality in performing for me is to share the story of each piece and bring the beauty of music itself through my personal voice, to the public.”

Dan Zhu performs with the Boca Raton Symphonia under Philippe Entremont at 4 p.m. Sunday at the Roberts Theater, Boca Raton. Tickets range from \$33 to \$59. Call 376-3848 or visit bocasymphonia.org.

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