

Albany Symphony Orchestra @ Palace Theatre, 11/14/09

By JOSEPH DALTON
Special to the Times Union

ALBANY – Maybe it's unfair to call George Li a little boy, since he is 14 years old. But he looks several years younger and that just serves to make his extraordinary piano playing all the more thrilling.

Li's sprightly performance in the Saint-Saens Piano Concerto No. 2 was a highlight of the Albany Symphony Orchestra's concert Saturday night in the Palace Theatre. Though his hands look barely large enough to reach an octave, he played wide spaced and complex chords, as well as fast, rippling runs, with confidence, ease and a beautiful pearly tone.

Beyond his youth and his skill, Li also showed a musical sensitivity and personal perspective on the piece. Since an interpretive viewpoint is usually the last thing to arrive in prodigies, Li is well on his way to being something.

A standing ovation came immediately and was quickly followed up with an encore, Chopin's Nocturne Opus Posthumous. With it, Li gave a generous dose of the one thing missing in the concerto, languid seductive charm.

The evening began with a recent work from Stacy Garrop, who has begun a season-long residency working with the orchestra as well as teaching composition at Hackett Middle School. Her "Becoming Medusa" was dramatic in a conservative and cinematic manner, which worked just fine. The extremes of texture went from a graceful solo by concertmaster Jill Levy to grand pounding statements for the full ensemble. At the highpoints, conductor David Alan Miller swung his baton with two arms like a batter aiming for the outfield.

Brahms' Second Symphony, filling the second half, took quite a while to come to life. In the opening Allegro, the strings were astringent and the horns tentative. A chill persisted into the Adagio. Finally some engaging warmth came in the Scherzo, starting with pungent woodwinds supported by pizzicatos in the cellos. Brahms' tugging tempos in the Trio were on target. The upswing continued into the final Allegro. Its thick textures possessed a gnarly bite but were also a bit ragged.

The performance of the Brahms was dedicated to Harriet Thomas, who retired at the end of last season after 40 years in the viola section. More than just a performer, she also served as personnel manager and unofficial mother confessor. To top it off, according to Miller, she's recently become a generous donor as well.

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union.

MUSIC REVIEW

Albany Symphony Orchestra with George Li, piano

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: Palace Theatre, Albany

Duration: Two hours with one intermission