

Soloists demonstrate technique, finesse in BSO concert

BARTOK AND MAHLER

Symphony Hall
Saturday, October 8, 8 p.m.

By Thomas Chen

Two young soloists joined maestro Seiji Ozawa and the Boston Symphony Orchestra on Saturday for a memorable and effective night of music-making. Pianist Krystian Zimerman played the Bartók Piano Concerto No. 1. And soprano Christine Schäfer sang in the last movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 4. Both soloists showed technical security and artistic finesse, splendidly led by Ozawa.

Hungarian composer Béla Bartók (1881-1945) wrote his first two piano concertos as vehicles for his own pianistic and compositional skills. This was not uncommon as Mozart, Beethoven, Rachmaninov, and Prokofiev also wrote for their own fingers. Bartók's first piano concerto was written in the fall of 1926, for the occasion of his American debut. Although Bartók ended up playing another of his works for his debut, his concerto did finally receive an American premiere in 1927. Because of the percussive use of the piano and dissonant harmonizations of folk melodies, the concerto received a less than enthusiastic reception. Besides Prokofiev, not many composers at that time really treated the piano as a percussion instrument. However difficult the work is to listen to, its innovations of repeated notes in distinct rhythmic units and treatment of the piano as a pitched

percussion instrument have helped it survive as an influential piece in the concerto repertoire.

Polish pianist Krystian Zimerman made a name for himself by winning the prestigious Chopin Competition in 1975. His recording reputation is mainly based on the piano works of Chopin, but lately he has branched out into the 20th century. The personality of the Bartók concerto is well-suited to Zimerman's full-bodied tone. After the sinister introduction that opens the concerto, Zimerman's technical command of the keyboard was well-displayed, accenting the potency of the motoric themes, breezing by Bartók's changing meters and tempos. The concerto requires the pianist literally to pound out whole thematic lines in octaves and thirds with both hands at full volume! At some of the louder passages, the orchestra effectively covered up the piano, but because of the nature of the music, I suppose this cannot be helped. I would have preferred that Zimerman pedal less often for a more sharply focused tone in the more percussive parts.

In the second movement Andante, Zimerman's full-bodied tone worked perfectly in the dialogue between piano and percussion instruments. An obvious precursor to the sonata for two pianos and percussion instruments (1937), the piano's contrapuntal lines eventually become purely rhythmic in character with repeated staccato eighth-notes. The music seems laughably simplistic, if one does not actually observe the complicated coordination the percussionists must execute. Zimerman's careful phrasing and good taste vividly col-

ored the near-transparent textures. After a short transition at the end of the second movement, the fast-paced third movement allegro returns us to the sound-world of the first movement in which we started. After warming up in the previous two movements, Zimerman's tone seemed much more immediate in the rhythmic frenzy and syncopated momentum. With the orchestra mostly bustling underneath the piano, the two seemed to balance out much better than in the first movement. Zimerman easily propelled the volatile passage-work to its exciting conclusion.

While Bartók's concerto boldly redefined the piano concerto, Mahler's Fourth Symphony occupies a curious position in the order of his symphonic output. After writing two gargantuan symphonies, Mahler (1860-1911) seems to step backward, writing something with the textural transparency of a classical period symphony. The symphony first began as a song in 1892. This song was orchestrated into the last movement of the symphony; hence, the first three movements were actually composed and derived after the last movement between 1899 and 1901. This is perhaps the most accessible of all Mahler symphonies, and judging by the number of available recordings, it is also arguably the most popular.

Ozawa opened the symphony at a leisurely pace, letting the simplicity of the rustic opening tune speak for itself. The first movement flowed beautifully in its uninterrupted glow. An interesting effect Mahler uses is a solo violin that is tuned upward one whole tone. The result is a melodic line that is tonally "out-of-phase" with the rest of the orchestra.

As Mahler indicates in the score, it is supposed to sound like a country fiddle that represents Death. I find the music too beautiful to conjure any images of the diabolical Grim Reaper, but the Grim Reaper was probably not what Mahler had in mind. Perhaps concertmaster Malcolm Lowe's playing was just too suave to imply anything as sinister as Death. Nonetheless, the first movement was wonderfully played and the dance-like character of the second movement was pleasingly articulated.

The centerpiece of the symphony is surely the twenty-minute long slow movement. With the extremely lush orchestration and climactic outbursts, the responsiveness of the Boston players was excellent. Ozawa never allowed the music to linger and grow stagnant; he moved the Boston players with singular purpose, shaping each of the individual variations effectively. As the slow movement closes, it seamlessly moves into the fourth movement where the soprano finally gets to stand up. I especially appreciated that Ozawa did not wait too long between movements for the audience to stop rustling. In the fourth movement, we are given a simple, but beautiful, tune which the soprano carries throughout the music. Christine Schäfer rendered the song securely but her phrasing was a bit stiff. Her singing was certainly more charming when she played Sophie in Strauss' Der Rosenkavalier in San Francisco. Considering that Ms. Schäfer had to wait forty-five minutes on-stage, she delivered a satisfying ending to Ozawa's impeccably sculpted interpretation of one of Mahler's happiest pieces.

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