Harvard soloist overshadows MIT Symphony

MIT SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Krege Auditorium.
Dec. 10, 8:30 p.m.

By Thomas Chen
STAFF REPORTER

Two 20th-century Russian composers were featured in the MIT Symphony Orchestra’s concert on Saturday night at Krege Auditorium. Under the direction of conductor David Epstein, they played Sergei Prokofiev’s Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major, Op. 26 and Dmitri Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 5 in B minor, Op. 47 (1937).

The soloist in the Prokofiev concerto was Harvard sophomore Sophia Chen. Although Chen played fabulously, the orchestra could not approach her stunning virtuosity and encountered several moments of insecurity and inadequacy. Luckily, the MIT players did recuperate enough to provide an exciting (if not slightly approximated) account of the Shostakovich symphony.

Similar to Mozart and Beethoven, Serge Prokofiev (1891-1953) was a “pianist-composer”; that is, he made a substantial career as a piano virtuoso and also wrote music in many different genres. The third concerto was intended for an American tour in 1921 which also included the premiere of his most popular symphony. Not only does this make the phrase “motoric,” percussive, and inadequacy. Luckily, the MIT players did recuperate enough to provide an exciting (if not slightly approximated) account of the Shostakovich symphony.

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With plenty of hand-over-hand runs and two-fisted discourses with the orchestra, Chen astonished the audience with her spectacular pianism. Her delivery of the richly harmonized first variation of the second movement was absolutely ravishing to hear. Furthermore, she showed that she is an excellent chamber musician too, engaging several times for a seemingly confused orchestra (e.g., mistimed cymbal crash at the beginning of the second variation). She also seemed to recalibrate during the last bars of the finale where the orchestra began to splay seriously.

Although Maestro Epstein rarely turned to look at his young soloist, Chen gracefully took her cues from the conductor. She combined technique and musicianship, weaving them into a thoughtful performance which the audience gratefully acknowledged afterwards.

Although an accomplished pianist himself, Shostakovich could probably be characterized as more of a “composer-pianist.” Probably more than Prokofiev, Shostakovich (1906-1975) was the “burned soul” of 20th-century Russian music. Much of his personal anguish is heard in his 15 string quartets. Moreover, history records his devastation when Stalin attacked his opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District (which, indeed, has the same musical essence that made one of a Madman music video).

The Fifth Symphony includes a Davies Artistic Reply to Just Criticism,” represented Shostakovich’s exposition to his government’s demands. Although Shostakovich ultimately later treated these demands more sarcastically (e.g., Ninth Symphony), the Fifth Symphony has remained a popular work despite the external circumstances influencing its composition.

Typical of Shostakovich, the Symphony No. 5 contains many passages of stark textures and jagged melodies, where the strings are sometimes asked to reach into the highest registers. Although the lean textures left the MIT violins and violas heavily exposed, they seemed to have more difficulty with the irregular rhythms here than with intonation in general.

Despite a rough start, the whole orchestra was well put together for the marvelous third movement, excellently shaped with great intensity. The third movement was such the highlight of the evening that even the most scrupulous members of the audience were probably willing to forgive less than perfect playing.

Unquestionably the most exciting sounds came from the brass section which played fanatically, most notably the trumpets. Their expressiveness of tone was a joy to listen to, and the counterpoint, march-like sections were thrilling to hear for the sheer volume. The last section of the final movement seemed intentionally appended specifically for the brass players.

Maybe Shostakovich felt that a loud, eratic ending would please the government officials, but at least, the blaring fanfares — replete with the timpani, ban, drums, and horns — provided a good “bang” to let the audience know when to clap. Helped by the excellent choice of tempos, the audience was glad to praise her performances.

Aside from the fine performance by Sophia Chen, the MIT Symphony Orchestra delivered a moderately acceptable performance of the Shostakovich. Their account of the Shostakovich symphony was far superior to their rough-house accompanying in the Prokofiev concerto.

The orchestra was definitely much more sympathetic in the previous concerts — for example, the Walton Viola Concerto and the Verdi Requiem. Rumor has it that they will be performing again with the MIT Concert Choir next semester, and it will be interesting to hear if accompanying a chorus readily improves the orchestra’s sound as it did last semester.

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