

Guest conductor, soloist, local composition make excellent music

By Peter Jacobi
H-T Reviewer

A guest conductor, a piano soloist, a composition from a local source and carried-away Tchaikovsky to carry away: These were the ingredients of Wednesday night's concert in the Musical Arts Center by the Indiana University Philharmonic.

In total, they left quite an impression. As individual elements, they also made their mark. And no small reason was the orchestra itself, so filled with fine young musicians and seemingly always just waiting for challenges and challengers to animate it. Well, the challenges and challengers were present. And so, appropriately, was a good-sized audience.

First, the identities. Then, let's consider the achievements.

Guest conductor: David Loebel, associate conductor of the St. Louis Symphony. Might he be a candidate for an opening at the School of Music or was he invited simply to visit?

Pianist: Hie Yon Choi, a Sebok student here, a young Korean who has won prizes in competitions bearing some distinguished names: Schnabel, Viotti, Busoni and Kappell. She took to the stage to play Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto, the one in C Minor, Opus 37.

Composition from a fellow Bloomingtonian: *Whispers and Echoes* by IU's Claude Baker who wrote the piece on commission from the St. Louis Symphony, for which he is composer-in-residence and, remember, the orchestra to which the aforementioned Loebel is attached, meaning that the guest most likely had some familiarity with the work before he arrived, which, in turn, must have helped the orchestra prepare for the performance.

Tchaikovsky: His Opus 32 tone poem *Francesca da Rimini*, a familiar, over-the-top expression in music of doomed passion involving Paolo and Francesca, as written of in *Dante's Inferno*.

Loebel scored. He made of the pliant Philharmonic a collaborating and congenial partner for soloist Choi, to shape a fine reading of the Beethoven concerto. He took the measure fully of Baker's complex blend of the new and the revered old, managing to convey his intuitive grasp of the music to the ensemble.

Whether wielding a baton, as most times he did, or batonless with hands undulating beckoningly in the air, Loebel at all moments seemed to give his players clear signals based on his conception of the music undergoing treatment. His loose-limbed stringbean of a physique also helped to communicate his interpretive wishes.

Choi proved herself an accomplished pianist with a sensitive rhythmic sense, with power in her chordal work, with mastery of runs and trills and such, and with an understanding of Beethoven's musical style.

She did not simply get through the brilliant cadenza that the composer had written for himself in the opening Allegro con brio; she gave it a personality reflective of her own emotional reaction to the music. The elegiac Largo, so serenely majestic, was beautifully realized. And one can but praise her handling of the closing Rondo.

The extensive notes provided listeners concerning Baker's *Whispers and Echoes* tell of the work's relationship to an earlier composition, *Shadows*, also written for the St. Louis Symphony. Both were inspired by and were, says the composer, built on Japanese poetry. That led this listener to wonder why the two pieces are not performed together to let the music prove the point. Of course, such a plan would place a considerable rehearsal burden on an orchestra and, perhaps, a burden on the perceptive listener. But the experiment would, most likely, prove instructive.

Haiku and tanka prompted Baker to write *Whispers and Echoes*. So did thoughts of music by others: the 14th-century French composer Baude Cordier, along with Ravel and Richard Strauss and Mahler. We're also advised of techniques such as

composite translations and isorhythmic construction.

But ultimately for a listener, none of this matters much. As a package, it becomes music from which one takes reaction and reflection as an individual. In the early movements, the music flits and floats and flails and flames, all the while flooding the senses. Here are dreamscapes meaning to suggest love and longing and loss, the expectation of morning and the disillusionment of night, the promise of spring and the vision of death in the autumn dusk.

The sonic effects are fascinating and suggestive. The piece ends in musical reversal. Contemporary emanations turn into lush romanticism as Baker seems to pay homage to Strauss and Mahler. One can discern, amidst the sudden expansiveness of the music, hints of Strauss' *Four Last Songs* and Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, both expressions of farewell and both, one might add, late expressions of orchestral flowering.

Baker could well be giving testimony that those earlier masters have not been forgotten, that they continue to stimulate him. Loebel and the Philharmonic moved smoothly and wholeheartedly through the score, giving it its rightful power.

Loebel's approach to *Francesca da Rimini* is praiseworthy, too. The score's deep colors — blood red, mysterious purple, enveloping browns, intimidating black — emerged in sweeping orchestral form, in ecstatic melody, in bombastic climaxes. The playing was taut and yet free, wide-ranging. If some of the builds hinted at the excessive, they were an interpreter's valid view of a composer's overwrought concept of Dante's tale. And exciting they surely were. And well done by the orchestra they surely were.

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