



Beijing Brings Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms

By MICHAEL SHERWIN

NEW YORK – Four commanding pianists from the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing were guest soloists at the concerto concert given under the auspices of “Julie Jordan Presents the New York Concerti Sinfonietta” August 9 at the historic Church of St. Joseph in Greenwich Village.

While Dr. Jordan – who is on the piano faculty of The Juilliard School Evening Division – had already presented four concerts in her regular 2010-11 season, she added this special summer performance in order to spotlight the artistic accomplishments of her visitors from China. Two of the pianists were faculty members of the China Conservatory of Music; the other two were their students.

Undeterred by torrential downpours that cleared just in time for the concert (what had been forecast as “showers” turned out to be more like a bath), the gratifyingly ample audience that attended was rewarded with outstanding performances.

The pianists from Beijing presented a program that promised to be as “meat and potatoes” as it comes – the three B’s: Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Despite this, the soloists transformed the evening into something that was far from routine; memorable both for the players’ technical prowess and their musical insight.

The soloists appeared with Julie Jordan’s New York Concerti Sinfonietta, a 37-member professional orchestra consisting of some of the area’s finest freelance musicians. As of this concert, the orchestra had been newly reconstituted, with major changes in personnel, and seemed better than ever, exhibiting improved clarity and balance. The difference in the sound of the orchestra was immediately apparent, manifested in tighter and more transparent, accented, and disciplined playing.

Also new to the series was guest conductor Paul Hostetter. Juilliard-trained, Hostetter is chair of orchestral activities at Columbus State University in Georgia and has conducted the New Jersey Symphony, the American Composers Orchestra, and the New York City Opera. During the evening’s proceedings, Hostetter proved to have a keen ear for balancing the orchestra with the soloists, without dominating them, in the vividly immediate yet reverberant acoustics of the church’s sanctuary. He also

was attentive to the soloists' interpretative concepts, fully partnering rather than merely accompanying them.

The concert began with the first movement of J. S. Bach's Concerto for Two Keyboards in C Major, BWV 1061. The second of Bach's three double keyboard concertos, it is the only one not to have originated as a transcription of a concerto originally composed for other solo instruments. It was sensitively performed on the present occasion by the husband-and-wife team of professors Chang-xin Guan and Xiao-xue Hu, both of whom teach at the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing.

"Bach," proclaimed Paderewski, "could weave counterpoint as a spider spins its web; up to the sky and back again." Bach's C Major Concerto is a particularly good example. There is considerable antiphonal interplay between the two instruments, as well as dialogue between the left and right hands in each solo part.

Although some soloists endeavor to make the two pianos sound as alike and indistinguishable as possible (for example, the duo of Sviatoslav Richter and Alexander Vedernikov), there is much to be said for differentiating the solo parts so that the listener can readily follow the contrapuntal conversation. Professors Guan and Hu apparently chose to clarify the counterpoint. They were aided by the contrasting timbres of the two pianos utilized at the concert: a resplendent Steinway concert grand provided by Klavierhaus, which sounded warm, rich, and plummy; and the church's Yamaha, sounding thinner but possessing great clarity.

This was gracious Bach, free of affectation, that steered clear of the pitfalls of rigid, inexpressive phrasing often encountered in early-music performances, or inappropriately anachronistic romanticism. The soloists' subtle dynamic shadings enhanced the rise and fall of each musical phrase. They maintained a relaxed, deliberate tempo without losing the steady rhythmic impetus that is so essential to conveying vitality in music of the baroque era.

The gradual broadening of tempo at the very end of the movement – instead of throwing on the brakes in an exaggerated ritard – was very nicely done, signaling the arrival of the concluding cadences in a tasteful yet effective manner.

If Mr. Hostetter's conducting of the concerto's string orchestra accompaniment was somewhat too reticent, he imparted a pleasing lilt and momentum. Since Bach wrote an alternative version of the concerto for two keyboards without orchestra, the overly discrete orchestral dynamics were not deleterious; Bach conceived the work so that the orchestral part could be entirely dispensed with.

Overall, the pianists' performance was so satisfying that it made one regret that the remaining two movements of the concerto had to be omitted to keep the length of the concert to manageable proportions.

Next on the program was Beethoven's monumental Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-Flat Major, Op. 73, "Emperor," given a profound interpretation by 17-year-old Xiao-yu Guo. Mr. Guo, who has been studying at the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing since the age of 13, started piano lessons when he was five and was admitted to the Wuhan Conservatory of Music at the age of ten. Since 2007, he has been a student of Ms. Xiao-xue Hu, who played in the Bach concerto heard earlier this evening.

Mr. Guo delivered an exceptionally perceptive, poetic, and technically masterful performance of this demanding work. This was fresh, exciting, and noble music-making. To clear the cobwebs off an overplayed standard repertory staple, making it sound newly minted, while remaining true to the composer's concept, vision, and style without eccentricity, is no small achievement.

Effortlessly surmounting the work's technical challenges, Mr. Guo subordinated technique to musical expression. Playing with rare subtlety and refinement, he brought salutary nuances to passages that are often pounded out by other pianists. Avoiding traditional pomposity, Mr. Guo shaped the "Emperor" Concerto's pervasive scales and arpeggios to expressive ends, employing an unusually wide range of dynamics, with beautifully gauged pianissimos.

Highlights of Mr. Guo's performance included the subtle rhetorical emphases in the first movement's opening bars; the control of dynamics with which he subordinated the left hand's

descending chromatic passages in the first movement to the chordal melodies in the right hand; his skillful use of the sustaining pedal to maintain a singing line; scales that were pearl-like in their evenness; the security of his octaves; and his warm and virile tone.

Mr. Guo's lyrical, fluid, and expressive playing in the slow movement was on a very high artistic level. He had an unfailing instinct for inflecting phrases in the right spot in just the right way. A chain of trills was ravishingly beautiful, while the hushed Alberti bass passage at the end of the movement was as far removed from mechanical regularity as it is possible to get, leaving the listeners in a state of reverie.

Incidentally, Leonard Bernstein quoted the fifth and sixth bars of the "Emperor" Concerto's slow movement in *West Side Story*, setting them to the words, "There's a Place for Us." When confronted with this resemblance, Bernstein reportedly remarked: "If you're going to steal, steal from the best!"

Throughout the concerto, Mr. Guo's stylistic comprehension was worthy of comparison with the great pianists of a previous generation. Felicitous details were constantly catching the listener's ear. He played with a maturity and interpretative wisdom seldom encountered in one so young; let alone one who has not yet had the experience of playing in mainstream international concert venues. If, in the future, Mr. Guo can demonstrate similar musical insight in other repertoire, he will be a formidable addition to the ranks of promising young pianists and a name to watch for.

As conductor, Mr. Hostetter was the perfect partner. He ensured that the orchestra was well balanced with Mr. Guo, coming to the fore when necessary without covering or overwhelming the pianist. The dance-like quality and syncopations of the work's finale were vibrantly conveyed. Additionally, the conductor elicited particularly exemplary playing from the orchestra's woodwinds.

In order to lend definition to the timpani rhythm that underlies the transition to the final movement's coda, however, the conductor stipulated that it be played with wooden sticks instead of felt mallets, making the instrument sound too percussive: more like a side drum than a kettledrum. Notwithstanding, the pianist's rush of flawlessly articulated octave scales in the coda brought the concerto to an exhilarating close; a performance displaying such confidence, assurance, and poise that it earned a standing ovation.

The evening ended with a work by the third of the three B's: Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 15, played by 21-year-old Da-wen Li. Mr. Li, who began studies at age 11, entered the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing at the age of 13. He is now in his sophomore year of studies for a Bachelor's degree in piano performance. His current teacher is Mr. Chang-xin Guan, who also played in the Bach concerto that opened the evening's concert.

Mr. Li, who has attained a high level of technical achievement, delivered a magisterial interpretation of this dauntingly difficult work. A powerful player, he was something of a firebrand in his octave passages, handily encompassing the massive sonorities and rhetorical flourishes of the first movement's most heroic moments, while generating a room-filling sonority that tested the Steinway grand piano to its limits.

Mr. Li's playing of the first movement's more ruminative passages, however, was a bit too emotionally constrained and reined-in, and thus, not as insightful as it may one day come to be. Mr. Li is already an accomplished pianist, and he is primed for further growth. Perhaps, with time, his already admirable concept of the concerto will gain further depth.

In the second movement, Mr. Li's was at his very best, effectively conveying the hushed, hymn-like quality of the second movement's opening, and sustaining the rapt mood throughout; while producing stirring, ringing sonorities at the movement's apex. The orchestra's playing of the introduction to the second movement showed the excellence of the woodwinds, with notable contributions in particular from the bassoons and oboes.

Throughout the concerto, Hostetter's conducting precisely accentuated the propulsion created by the orchestral accompaniment's syncopations and rhythmic displacements so characteristic of Brahms. He deftly navigated the scherzo-like fugal interlude in the finale, evoking beautifully articulated playing from the various sections of the orchestra.

Mr. Li's finale had a swagger and impetuous sweep that engendered genuine excitement. The panache of his playing reflected his control, confidence, and discipline (although certain passages were given slightly foursquare phrasing that could have benefitted from a little more elasticity or further extension of the dynamic compass by playing quiet passages more softly).

Mr. Li's forceful and impetuous last movement cadenza swept all before it. He then skillfully built the coda to its inexorable and triumphant close with a flourish of brilliant playing that received another standing ovation. It was a fitting end to a most impressive concert.

Overall, the consistently high quality of the performances at this evening's concert supplied abundant evidence that the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing is providing musical training that is definitely world-class.

The first concert of the new season in the 2011-12 series of "Julie Jordan Presents the New York Concerti Sinfonietta" will be given at St. Joseph's Church on September 20.

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"Julie Jordan Presents" will offer its 2011 International Piano Concerto Competition this fall. A concert will be given at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall on October 19, and piano competition winners will perform with the New York Concerti Sinfonietta at Weill Hall on December 17. Additional performance opportunities for instrumentalists, singers, and chamber ensembles will be available throughout the 2012 season as part of the New York Concerti Institute. Soloists are invited to apply for the competition and subsequent performances. For information, contact www.juliejordanpresents.com.