

At The Concert

Pianist Outshines Orchestra

L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande was founded 56 years ago by conductor Ernest Ansermet who remained its mentor until his death in 1970. At that time one of the ensemble's principal guest conductors, Wolfgang Sawallisch, took over the artistic reins, and it was under his direction that the players appeared last night as the second inclusion in the current Woolsey Hall Series.

The program opened with the first local airing of Armin Schibler's "Metamorphoses Ebrietatis." In the program notes Schibler, best known, according to the same notes, for his efforts in ballet and opera, writes that the "Metamorphoses" was inspired by the scenario of a group of people who attend a reception. "At the beginning they behave as expected," he continues, "but under the influence of alcohol they lose control of themselves and everybody reveals his or her true character." Unfortunately, the true character of the resultant musical variations is one of painful obviousness. I resist the temptation to comment on how much a bit of the grape might have helped matters on this listener's part.

Taken on its own terms Schibler's manipulation of his materials is coherent if overly protracted, and treated to always competent, sometimes even imaginative orchestration. But the materials themselves emerge as a rehash of diluted Schoenberg, Debussy, Moussorgsky and even a moment or two when one expected Stan Kenton to step out from the wings to give the next cut-off. The composer's leaning toward music for the stage were evident throughout, and while dance might prove an asset, it could little dilute the tedium of ideas too often heard before.

Mr. Sawallisch is an extremely capable conductor. Here and throughout Mendelssohn's lightweight Symphony No. 3 ("The Scotch") his gestures were invariably made with a purpose that became clearly audible in orchestral nuance, and were refreshingly devoid of crowd pleasing gyrations that only serve to impede the flow of musical communication.

But if the overall impression was one of solid, professional musicianship, it was young Japanese pianist Etsuko Tazaki who turned a musically routine evening into a memorable one. Aided by Sawallisch's sensitively attuned and sympathetic accompaniment, Miss Tazaki fashioned a re-creation of the Schumann Piano Concerto that was nothing less than radiant in almost every respect.

Schumann's only piano concerto constitutes a milestone in 19th Century music for piano and orchestra, and while the first movement was completed as a fully rounded work several years before the addition of the Intermezzo and Finale it is nonetheless thoroughly integrated and seamlessly crafted creation in its final form. It also provides no scrim behind which a pianist can hide. The piano is absolutely central throughout, and in addition to requiring a virtuosic level of technical competency the musical corpus falls absolutely flat without that rare amalgam of executional ease and extroverted — at times even flamboyant emotion on the part of its chief protagonist.

Miss Tazaki was found wanting in neither respect and the power of her playing last night clearly suggests a place with the top echelon of those pianists now appearing before the public. Possessing technique to spare she also exhibited a flawless sense of time at all levels and a bravura flair that consistently emanated from within the music rather than simply because of it.

A question that has been simmering in this reviewer's mind should be registered at this point. Namely, why do music directors so seldom plan programs with a consideration for how long it takes a maneuver a grand piano on and off stage? Intermission is obviously the best time to accomplish it, and Tuesday night — mirroring many similar events in the past — there were two. Unfortunately, the first one was unannounced and occurred after the opening piece while all in attendance waited with nothing better to do than watch a 110-piece orchestra file off stage and return 10 minutes later. If the program had been re-ordered it would also have served the dual purpose of saving the best for last.

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