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Chu-Fang Huang, pianist

The Record

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Pianist lends spark to Mendelssohn

By Glenn Pillsbury
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In a dazzling display of virtuosic bravado and emotional range, pianist Chu-Fang Huang kicked off the second half of the Stockton Symphony's 82nd season Thursday evening at Atherton Auditorium. The program repeats tonight.

Huang's vehicle for the evening was Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No. 1 in G minor, one of the less frequently heard concertos in the repertoire. It deserves to be heard more often though, as it's an incredibly spirited work when done right.

The concerto does not make deeply philosophical demands on the listener, but that doesn't mean it's to be taken lightly. Written as something of a showpiece to sustain Mendelssohn's performing career, the work's opening passagework by the soloist immediately sets the stage.

Huang handled the rapid scales and double-octave runs with a tightly focused approach, injecting an edge-of-your-seat excitement into what is essentially very straightforward music.

She allowed herself to stretch out artistically in the movement's second theme, as her interpretation kneaded the melodic nuances of the section with great care. If at times Huang played things a little too appassionato, only Mendelssohn himself can be blamed for having countered the opening storminess with something every bit as sentimental.

The concerto's slower second movement was aided mainly by the cellos and violas in a beautiful "song without words" interplay with the piano. Conductor Peter Jaffe and Huang dug into the emotion of this movement, communicating with confidence and skill.

Indeed, Huang focused the audience's attention on the movement's underlying drama with a few theatrical gestures as well, frequently draping her left hand over the edge of the piano while her right hand worked out the final bits of a melody or a trill at the top of the keyboard.

Sufficiently warmed up by this point, Huang really took off in the final movement, handling Mendelssohn's brilliant flourish with fiery enthusiasm and demonstrating the kind of precise technique that's gotten the young Chinese musician to this point in her career. While these kinds of thrill rides have the potential to turn into a blur of notes that sacrifices overall musicality, Huang and Jaffe never let this one go that route.

Huang skillfully wound down the audience with an encore based on a Chinese folk melody that seemed to recast what had been a torrent of notes in Mendelssohn into shimmering cascades of marvelous impressionism.

Framing Huang's performance were works from two wildly different aesthetics that together nevertheless added up to an intriguing whole.

In a welcome stretch for the symphony, the program opened with John Adams' "Foxtrot for Orchestra: The Chairman Dances," a semi-independent offshoot of his 1987 opera "Nixon in China."

Grounded in the pulse minimalism made famous by Philip Glass and Steve Reich, rhythmic interplay has a significant role in the work. The orchestra largely rose to the challenge in those sections, though it also seemed slightly more comfortable with the restrained big band sound Adams used for depicting Chairman and Madame Mao's nostalgic dance.

A performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's late-Romantic symphonic suite "Sheherazade" closed the program. Loosely based on four of the "One Thousand and One Nights" stories, the work seems to last nearly as long as that though.

With two slower movements right up front, the piece never really gets going, and the performance was saved by Jaffe's exposition of the third movement's lush melodies and the many fine solos played by violinist Christina Mok, oboist Thomas Nugent, and several other section principals.