

Joyce Yang

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Pianist dazzles with dress and Prokofiev

BY MARK ARNEST

Pianist Joyce Yang managed to upstage her own dress at Saturday night's Colorado Springs Philharmonic concert at the Pikes Peak Center.

I'm talking about a flowing, iridescent violet gown that shimmered with aqua highlights. But it was forgotten the moment the 20-year-old Yang tore into Prokofiev's brilliant and sarcastic Piano Concerto No. 3. It's clear that she's one of the most talented young pianists in the world.

It's basically a given that today's virtuoso pianists will play all the right notes. Yang did that, but she did much more. Physically, she's a picture of confident relaxation, attacking the concerto's wide leaps as though they were fun. (They make most pianists' blood run cold.) Musically, she's a natural, with a strong sense of rhythm and the ability to make every phrase leap off the page. Her sound is exquisite: In loud passages, Prokofiev's often-dissonant chords were never just clumps of notes, but had definition. In soft passages, she had the courage to whisper, and even drift off into a reverie — but a reverie so musically compelling that the audience followed her wherever she went.

The relationship between Yang and conductor Lawrence Leighton Smith seemed happy — but as good as the orchestra's contribution was, it couldn't match Yang's sheer bounce and crispness.

Announcing that we'd had enough sarcasm for one night, Yang changed the mood with her encore, Chopin's ultra-lyrical "Andante spianato." This was as sensitive as the Prokofiev was energetic, and in the chorale near the end, Yang made us forget the piano had hammers. The piece would have benefited from a more improvisational approach, though. Sure, the rhythmic nuances were convincing, but they were also duplicated too perfectly when the music repeated, which made them sound contrived.

Amazingly, Yang may not have provided the evening's musical highlight. In the program's closer — Dvorak's rarely played Symphony No. 6 — the philharmonic played as well as it ever has.

Dvorak was out to impress his audience in this sprawling symphony, and he still succeeds. The catchy, simple themes are developed with enormous sophistication and imagination. The symphony evokes a feeling of communing with nature — sometimes a bucolic, dreamy nature, as in the second movement, and sometimes a furious storm, as in the third.

With three trombones and a tuba, the work shows off the philharmonic's excellent low brass section. It also makes demands at the upper register, with a nice solo for piccolo player Susan Kerbs Townsend and some unusually high violin writing, which the section handled well.

But it was the ensemble playing that was most impressive. Effects such as the broadening of the tempo leading into the first movement's climax usually belong in the realm of great orchestras, not good ones. It's a testament to the orchestra's progress that such moments are no longer surprising.

The philharmonic gave a hint of what was to come in the curtain-raiser, Cherubini's Overture in G minor. In the solemn introduction — which has more than a faint echo of Beethoven — the violins played not just with perfect unanimity, but with a quiet focus and intensity that grabbed the listener's attention. The allegro is less musically distinguished, but the orchestra captured its passion and vitality.