

# The Pueblo Chieftain

November 5, 2006

The Pueblo Chieftain ■ Pueblo, Colorado

## Pueblo Symphony 'Rachs'; Fan rolls

Though the Pueblo Symphony's "Rach and Roll" presentation Saturday evening, with guest pianist Joel Fan, didn't include flaming keyboards a la Jerry Lewis, it was as close as classical music gets.

Colorado State University-Pueblo's Hoag Hall welcomed a nearly full house for three pieces spanning more than a century, featuring one of the most celebrated young piano phenoms of the present day.

As is customary, the symphony warmed patrons up, this time with the overture from Rossini's "Barber of Seville." A toe-tapping crowd-pleaser, the piece also exposed the challenges of introducing so many new members to the symphony this year. There were moments in the faster staccato sections where the violins would spread a bit thin and the percussionists would try to run off with the tempo. As always, conductor Jacob Chi wrangled everything back into place for a satisfying summation.

The second piece was Schubert's evocative Symphony No. 8 in B minor, also known as the "Unfinished." This is because it contains only two movements instead of the traditional three or four. Terse or not, Schubert packs plenty into this composition, brimming with stark dynamic contrasts and chilling melodies. I was especially pleased that this piece features the cello and double bass sections, who get the rare opportunity to introduce and revisit the ominous melodic theme. Though carrying the symphony can be a challenge for the lower-register instruments, our symphony presented a delightfully robust interpretation.

I don't know much about film score giant John Williams and his influences, but I'd lay odds that he is a big fan of Franz Schubert. Famous for his hundreds of songs written before an untimely death at age 31, Schubert was a craftsman of memorable and affecting tunes, ideal for Pueblo's own highly emotive conductor. If you didn't know any better, you'd swear you had heard some of Schubert's timeless melodies in more contemporary cinematic settings.

Speaking of film, everyone has had those moments when you're watching a movie and you become so absorbed in the moment that you actually forget you're simply an observer. The hypnotic virtuosity of Joel Fan tackling what is arguably one of

the most difficult piano concertos ever composed provided just such an experience. There were times when I

became so lost amid Fan's rendition of Sergei Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor that I not only forgot about the room in which I was sitting; I forgot about the rest of the symphony.

Before anyone mistakes this for criticism, please understand that in such a concerto, it's the symphony's role to lift up the soloist, while taking nothing away from the showcase. In particular, this concerto suggests Rachmaninov either had an obsessive love for piano, or he really hated pianists. The content of the piano part is absolutely punishing, to the point that most performers would not be stupid or brazen enough to even try playing it.

Joel Fan, however, is neither of these. He offered the single most exhilarating musical performance I've ever seen in Pueblo. The wonder of his playing is not only in his technical expertise. Fan demonstrates an emotional sophistication that digs deeply into Rachmaninov's own musical soul, spilling the guts of the work out on the stage, leaving nothing behind but viscera and a stunned, grateful audience.

I suppose we should expect no less from a young man whose debut with the New York Philharmonic was at age 11, and who has demonstrated mastery not only of every period of symphonic music, but of most mainstream popular styles, as well. Perhaps even more important is that Joel Fan is a swell guy. He has a heart of gold, and if you didn't know he was one of the finest pianists alive, you'd want to grab him by the neck and give him a noogie.

Fan offered master classes to high school and college students while in town, and he met adoring fans over pizza on Friday. He hung around in the lobby after the concert, shaking hands and signing CDs. He's just the kind of guy who you'd want to be your buddy.

Thank goodness he's not as nice to pianos as he is to the rest of the community, or we'd all be missing out on a truly precious musical gift.



**CHRISTIAN  
PIATT**



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## SYMPHONY DOES NICE JOB WITH CONTRASTING STYLES

BY PIERRE KENYON

MARCH 14, 2005

On Saturday night, a nearly full house at Hoag Hall, on the Colorado State University-Pueblo campus, enjoyed the Pueblo Symphony's performances of two great musical compositions by Brahms and Rachmaninoff, under the direction of Jacob Chi.

It was a wonderful, though contrasting, program, combining, perhaps, two prime examples of music in the classical and romantic veins.

Contrary to his times, Brahms did not appreciate the dramatic style on such a scale as evident in the works of Wagner and Liszt. Indeed, some thought Brahms to be old-fashioned, even dull, in his adherence to classical forms and tradition.

Chi, in his introductory remarks before conducting the Brahms piece, demonstrated how Brahms and Beethoven walked, which was very enlightening, along with mentioning happenings contemporaneous to Brahms' time. Currently, the art of the great sculptor, Rodin, appeared along with the French Impressionists, Edison's invention of the phonograph, and the first time frozen meat was shipped from South America to Europe. Wow! I think we got the picture.

But, as clearly shown in the playing of the Brahms Symphony No. 2 by the Pueblo Symphony, although the form was classical, the treatment in the four movements was certainly romantic with its lyrical and pastoral themes tugging at the listener's heart strings.

Though the evening's program was billed as "Music of the Young Masters," it's difficult for me to perceive the significance of that description when Brahms took 10 years to write his first symphony, then wrote his second at the mature age of 40. However, the other heading on the program sheet, "Young at Heart" seemed apt enough. Following intermission, it was Joel Fan, the guest artist's, turn to shine in his exciting performance of the ever-popular Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 2.

At rehearsal, on the previous evening, Chi was concerned about the balance between the piano and the orchestra. Fan also had the same concern along with having to choose among the two pianos available to him. Interestingly enough, after playing each piano along with the orchestra, Chi and Fan made the same choice.

To this observer, the piano chosen had more depth, more harmonics were evident, and, perhaps, a better definition in tone, though somewhat less bright than the other.

At any rate, Fan took full advantage of the piano chosen by demonstrating, in an exciting manner, his mastery of the instrument in Saturday night's performance.

Some people have said the Rachmaninoff Concerto No. 2 is a bit too sugary or sentimental for their taste. I don't buy that view, though, let's face it, the music is simply gorgeous and one can get carried away by the great emotional sweep of it. Fan's interpretation certainly provided ample opportunities for that to happen.

As to the balance achieved by Fan, the pianist and the orchestra, conducted by Chi, I'd say, for the most part, it worked well. In a few of the louder passages in the first movement, the brass and horns seemed to dominate. That may be due in part to the placement of the reflective panels behind and above the orchestra.

The audience showed its appreciation of the work of guest artist, Fan, and the Pueblo Symphony by giving them three standing ovations and prolonged applause. Fan graciously played an encore, the second movement of a piano sonata by Rachmaninoff. Fan's performance of it was sensitive, poignant and memorable.

I should like to point out the program notes provided by James Duncan that added much to the insight and understanding of the composers and their music.

Next on the agenda for the Pueblo Symphony will be the season's finale, "USO, A Tribute to Veterans," on April 30, at Hoag Recital Hall at 7:30 p.m. Call 545-7967 for tickets and information.