

Playful performance embraced by SSO audience

The StarPhoenix · 17 Jan 2011 · · REVIEW By Heather Persson hpersson@thestarphoenix.com

It is a sign of the times that a YouTube sensation would help create one of the most buzz-worthy nights with the Saskatoon Symphony Orchestra in recent memory.

And an almost capacity, very enthusiastic audience showed that music from the past played by a rising talent of the future is an excellent direction for the symphony.

“ I think I have made a real coup,” Maestro Victor Sawa said from the platform in introducing the evening and guest artist Martin Leung. “ It is 19th century meets 20th century.” Martin Leung, just 24, stirred the crowd as he acted as soloist on Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1. But the Orange County, Calif., musician first captured the imagination of audiences around the world with a YouTube video of him performing an arrangement of the Super Mario Brothers theme wearing a blindfold. It is estimated the clip has garnered more than 40 million hits.

Among those who saw the video was Sawa. He then met Leung after the pianist performed in the Video Games Live tour in Saskatoon and invited him to play with the SSO.

The refined young man that walked onto the stage at TCU Place Saturday is not one who would be easily pegged as a gamer or an Internet star. But he is recognizable from the video that made him famous by his broad, easy smile and his joyful energy.

Leung plays with his whole body — his shoulders jumping playfully, his head tilting back for serene passages and even hovering menacingly over the keyboard for darker musical moments. It is not overdone, just enough to draw the audience into the emotion of the performance.

His Yale education and experience in international musical competition is clear in his precise, skilled attack of the keyboard. Leung is not just a success on the web, but someone who debuted at Carnegie Hall at age 16.

At the completion of the work, the crowd was on its feet in seconds, cheering as it rose. Leung was rewarded for his work with an embrace from Sawa and affectionate smiles from the symphony players.

Having charmed even the most conservative classical music lovers in the audience, Leung’s encore performance of the Super Mario Brothers melody was received with delighted laughter and more enthusiastic cheers.

Another Tchaikovsky work, the light and pleasing Polonaise Evgeny Onegin, kicked off the night and did its job as an appetizer in making the audience hungry for the more substantive fare just around the corner.

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade — which is the tale of The Arabian Nights told through the musical interpretation of the Russian composer — was a “ soft” ending to the evening Sawa admitted in his introduction to the piece. And although it is a rich and creative work, the concert did lose some momentum after the intermission in terms of excitement. But the performance of the exotic symphonic suite infused with Eastern allure was thoroughly enjoyable and added a sultry component to the theme of the evening, Russian Romance.

Concertmaster Michael Swan's emotional and sensual play deserves recognition, as he gave voice to the Princess Scheherazade in the musical storyline in a very effective way. Fine work by bassoons, oboe and the percussion section also helped add spice to the work.