

YOUNG N.E.C. ARTISTS PROVIDE HOPE - AND JOY

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MUSIC REVIEW

N.E. CONSERVATORY YOUTH PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Music of Wong and Mahler

At: Jordan Hall, last night It's profoundly affirming to hear a concert like the Youth Philharmonic Orchestra's season finale. Such an occasion reminds one that no matter how discouraging the ambient culture, some youngsters will always be drawn by the power of great music, will surrender to the irresistible attraction of an instrument that speaks to them. Such a concert also confirms that young musicians are mastering the technique, the idioms, the styles of even the most difficult music at an increasingly early age.

Under the direction of Benjamin Zander, who has conducted it for 29 years, the YPO is the most senior orchestra in New England Conservatory's preparatory division. The 100 members, ages 12 to 18, represent the most accomplished instrumentalists in the school and many of them go on to professional training and careers.

With Zander always challenging them, these performers have achieved musical peaks that they may not experience again until (and unless) they join a premiere symphony orchestra as professionals.

This concert was a case in point. The program consisted of the Piano Concerto No. 2 (!) of *Cynthia Wong*, a 17-year-old pianist and composer who is graduating this year from Algonquin Regional High School and will attend Juilliard in the fall. Wong, who studies at NEC, won the 1999 Morton Gould Young Composers Award for this piece. The remainder of the program was devoted to the Mahler Symphony No. 9, a lengthy, extraordinarily difficult and complex work that would shipwreck many a lesser orchestra.

In three movements, Wong's Piano Concerto grew out of her own improvising at the keyboard and was originally written for two pianos. She was the featured soloist. What is immediately apparent - and not surprising - is that the concerto evokes the young composer's important musical influences. In particular, the first movement, *Allegro e molto ritmico*, is modeled after Bartok while the slow, modal movement calls to mind the Ravel Piano Concerto in G. That Wong should imitate these composers (as well as some jazz idioms) is age appropriate and demonstrates her good taste. She will develop a more individual voice with maturity. In the meantime, she shows remarkable technical accomplishment and, particularly, great rhythmic sophistication. The music is attractive and full of bright, glittering surfaces. She and the orchestra played it with *elan*.

But it was the Mahler that tested the orchestra's mettle - its instrumental mastery, stamina, and expressive generosity. On nearly every count, this was an extraordinary performance. Zander, in his program notes, pointed out the extremities of the symphony, its juxtaposition of the grotesque and the sublime, its crazily complicated textures, its deliberate messiness, its despair and joy. The kids took him at his word and gave their all. Not all of it was beautiful - it's not supposed to be.

But the playing, particularly in the middle scherzo-like movements, was teeming with life force. And the finale sounded like an anticipation of heaven.

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