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MUSIC

NEC's youth orchestra brings a tough symphony to life

Music Review/by T.J. Medrek

Saturday, June 3, 2000

New England Conservatory Youth Symphony, conducted by Benjamin Zander, at Jordan Hall, Boston, last night; repeats tomorrow.

Anyone who walked into Jordan Hall last night expecting a "mere" student recital would have left some two hours later overwhelmed by what they'd just experienced.

No, the playing by the teenage members of the New England Conservatory Youth Philharmonic Orchestra wasn't technically perfect. But under the leadership of Benjamin Zander - who seems as much magician as maestro - these young men and women did something even more impressive. They brought one of the most challenging of all symphonies for any orchestra, Mahler's Ninth, vividly to life.

Before they did that, they performed Cynthia Wong's Second Piano Concerto, composed just last year, with the composer herself as soloist. With this work Wong, who at 17 already has a resume filled with awards for both composing and playing, showed first of all that she's studied hard. The 20-minute, three-movement concerto brought to mind those of Ravel and, especially, Prokofiev - both fine models for anyone.

But even better were those moments when Wong's individual voice shone through with, say, a quick, quirky violin solo or a melody that took a delightfully unexpected turn. Let's hope that her continued studies (she's off to the famed Juilliard School in New York this fall) encourage that individuality. Her playing was vigorous and compelling - Wong's is clearly no small musical talent - as was the orchestra's.

Mahler's Ninth still, more than 90 years since its completion, may be the most extraordinary symphony written since Beethoven. It's a nearly 90-minute meditation on dying, written shortly after both the death of the composer's 4-year-old daughter and the diagnosis of the heart disease that would eventually end his own life. The symphony's four movements correspond roughly to a dying man's journey from initial disorientation and sorrow through denial, anger and, in the last movement, acceptance.

This is tough stuff both musically and emotionally for anyone, let alone young people just starting their lives. And it's no surprise that the toughest parts for them weren't the loud, brashly daring ones but the quiet, reflective passages.

Still, this youthful band delivered a dynamic interpretation in which even the individual flaws had a certain meaning and sincerity. Leave it to Zander to make sure that, above all, they made this music



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it to Zander to make sure that, above all, they made this music about death live to the fullest.

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