

Conductor exits, orchestra delivers in French program

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By Keith Powers Contributing writer

HYANNIS – Take away a conductor, and you get great performances. That might not have been maestro Jung-Ho Pak's subtext Sunday afternoon at the Barnstable High School Performing Arts Center, but it certainly proved to be the case with his estimable Cape Symphony.

This program, made up entirely of French music, and featuring pianist Lise de la Salle, stood out for the orchestra's rock-solid playing, and for Pak's ability once again to bring context to the music and to its origins.

Presenting unusual works, informative onstage guests and one true rarity – a conductor who will step out of the spotlight – the program had everyone feeling like flying the tricolour.

Airy soprano Kim Lamoureux began the concert with an arrangement of "La Marseillaise," and returned to add coloratura sparkle to the famous aria "Je Veux Vivre" from Gounod's "Romeo and Juliet."

The orchestra kicked in a little can-can (from Offenbach's "Orphée") and a terrific arrangement by Debussy of Erik Satie's "Gymnopédie" (with unusual and smartly played underpinning in dual harps, principal Sandra Bittermann and Sarah Stuart).

Ravel's G minor concerto proved an apt vehicle for de la Salle, whose musical flexibility and collaborative skills were brought to bear. The young pianist has made a number of area appearances in recent seasons, with mixed results. But this Ravel sparkled.

It's a work of questionable proportions – the first movement is way too long, the finale way too short, and the middle movement, while full of introspective beauty, sounds like it belongs to a different score. But de la Salle brought out the playful danceability in the outer movements, and shaped the middle movement into a thoughtful interlude (helped greatly by expert playing from English hornist Laura Pardee Schaefer).

The rest of the orchestra played with insight as well. The finale, which goes by in an instant, featured multiple short solos that morphed into duets with the pianist, most notably by principal clarinetist Mark Miller and newly named principal bassoonist Michael Zuber.

Three stalwarts of 20th-century French music filled the second half of the program: Debussy's "Afternoon of a Faun," along with Ravel's "La Valse" and "Boléro." Pak introduced Cape Cod Museum of Art director Edith Tonelli to offer brief remarks about impressionism, and she provided intelligent context to the ideas behind the works that followed.

Principal flute Zachary Sheets shaped "Afternoon of the Faun" delicately; "La Valse," Ravel's bumpy and almost-noir take on the Viennese waltz tradition, had a cabaret feel, the orchestra shaping it into a world-weary look at life.

Then came "Boléro," the sexually charged score that invokes cornrows and open marriage to a certain generation. Pak spent some time praising his orchestra beforehand – referring to them pointedly as "80 soloists who like playing together" – and then surprisingly left the stage.

Leaving Ravel's pioneering score entirely in the hands of his orchestra. Anchored by the insistent snare drum of principal Paul Gross, with pizzicato strings underneath, one by one almost a dozen soloists stood and delivered Ravel's repetitive, minimalist melodic line, with their own tone color and subtle twists.

The effect mesmerized – perfectly realizing Ravel’s intent. It took the conductor’s absence to make the music spring to life – a contradiction perhaps, but yet another example of Pak’s ability to make performances sparkle for his audience.

The Cape Symphony Orchestra next performs “Holiday on the Cape” Dec. 2 through 4 at the Barnstable High School Performing Arts Center. Concert times and ticket information: www.capesymphony.org or 508-362-1111.

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