

The Modesto Bee

Violinist, Modesto Symphony Score with 'Butterfly Lovers'

February 8, 2009
By Stephen Thomas

The Modesto Symphony celebrated Valentine's Day this weekend with the attractive "Butterfly Lovers" Violin Concerto performed impeccably by the up-and-coming young artist Jessica Lee.

Depicting an ancient Chinese "Romeo and Juliet"-style tale, the Butterfly Lovers concerto is the only piece of classical music I have ever seen that lists two composers, in this case Gang Chen and Zhanhao He. Much of it, to my ear, sounded like a film score that would suit an IMAX production about the famous sights of Chinese culture.

And, I would say, the performance possessed all of the professional polish and sound of an already recorded piece of music. Jessica Lee played with a bright but expressive tone that conveyed a personal engagement with this piece that sold it to the audience with utter conviction. She provided the lyrical passages with a spacious flexibility that contrasted effectively with the crisp, clean attacks of the fast folk-like segments. All the technical elements in Ms. Lee's playing were totally mastered with an assurance that explains her many successes in prestigious competitions. The orchestra, likewise, played its supportive role effectively, by turns powerful and delicate as the music demanded, maintaining ideal balance with the soloist throughout.

In fact, the orchestra played exceptionally well all evening. There was hardly a moment when I was distracted by the little ensemble and tuning issues that sometimes arise due to the short rehearsal schedule that the orchestra must operate on. They gave the subtle, subdued concert opener, Faure's "Pelléas et Mélisande Suite," a performance that felt like a soothing, warm, sonic bath, giving us all a very welcome moment of relief from yet another week of brutal economic news. The strings in particular were responsive to David Lockington's musically sensitive reading of this score. Individual soloists also contributed substantially to the success of the performance, notably principal oboe Denis Harper in "Fileuse" and principal flute Elaine Moon who was kept very busy turning out elegant renditions of difficult solos through all the repertoire on the program.