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Symphony review: In return engagement, Pavel Baleff partners with pianist Fei-Fei Dong

By Larry Lapidus

Conductor Pavel Baleff first appeared with the Spokane Symphony three years ago in a program of Brahms and Schumann so beautifully presented that audiences were left awaiting his return eagerly.

The wait ended Saturday night when Maestro Baleff conducted the orchestra in a program of some less familiar music and partnered with a brilliant young pianist in a justly popular concerto – that in A minor, Op. 16 (1868), by Edvard Grieg (1843-1931).

No such problems afflicted the performance of the piece that closed the first half of the program: Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor, in which Baleff and the orchestra were joined by the brilliant Chinese pianist, Fei-Fei Dong. **Her pleasant and modest manner conceals an iron determination to acquire a technique of transcendental brilliance.**

In Baleff she found an ideal partner, one who has the same gift of allowing a phrase to speak fully and to give enough time regardless of tempo to achieve maximum expression. The very opening appearance of the piano, which is ordinarily taken as a simple flourish of octaves and arpeggios, was in the hands of Dong an expressive and moving experience. So it proved throughout the performance: **Passages ordinarily considered subordinate, in her hands turn to pure poetry.**

The exquisite melody in the last movement that concludes the piece is first introduced by the solo flute. It was performed on this occasion by Principal Bruce Bodden with his characteristic beauty of tone and poignant simplicity before it was taken up by the piano. In Baleff, Dong found a collaborator capable of achieving the same expressive plasticity of phrasing of which she is a master.

In case any doubt remained as to the power of her technique, Dong performed as an encore a famously demanding fantasy on the Turkish March from Mozart's C major Sonata No. 11, K331 by the virtuoso Russian pianist Arcadi Volodos. In the space of a few minutes, Volodos includes virtually every technical challenge Franz Liszt lays out in his "Transcendental Etudes," and then some.

One could watch the faces of the orchestra members listening to the encore change from respectful attention to delight, and finally to incredulous amazement as **Dong threaded her way through the thicket of difficulties in this witty and staggeringly difficult piece.**