DeLong: CPO's all-Mozart concert ranges from witty to weighty

Kenneth DeLong, Calgary Herald

The CPO’s early May Masterworks Series concert was supposed to be a Mozart/Bruckner concert — it said so on the ticket. In the end, it turned out to be an all-Mozart event. But given the quality of the playing and of evident audience enjoyment, this was no bad thing. We have not so far had very much experience with what Rune Bergmann, the orchestra’s still relatively new conductor, does with pre-Beethoven repertoire, often a weak point with many youngish conductors. With Bergmann, however, it is evident that his considerable European experience in modern, more historical approaches to earlier music has stood him in good stead.

Throughout the concert, whether in the orchestral works or in the accompaniment to the piano concerto, he showed an admirable sensitivity to the ways in which pre-romantic music might be approached in matters of rhythm and in a lean, less weighted conception of the total sound.

This was evident from the outset in the paring down of the orchestral forces for the concert to not much more than 30-plus players — about the size of a Mozart orchestra, at least to the best of our knowledge.

The opening work, Mozart’s Overture to The Magic Flute, was lithe and pliant in the shaping of the phrases, the contrapuntal basis of the music well delineated and clear. This was not ponderous Mozart, quite the opposite, in fact, with a Mozartean buoyancy and witty smile on the music, perfect for the start of a comic opera, and indeed this concert.

While the hues were darker in the famous Symphony in G minor, K. 550, the same lithe quality in the music-making prevailed. This is one of the most famous symphonies ever written, and the only symphony I ever heard booed in Vienna at a performance in which the conductor went decidedly against Viennese tradition. Lovers of Mozart are frequently picky about what constitutes the right way to play this most beloved of composers, and on this occasion, it was quite evident that the performance hit the sweet spot with the audience.

And so it should it did: the coiled energy of the first movement, with its dark shudders was strongly projected, as were the reflective aspects of the slow movement, happily taken not too slowly. The best came at the end with an energized, vivid account of the splendid finale, the playing warm and alive at every turn. This was very classy Mozart.

However, from the point of view of sheer fun and sparkle, the high point of the concert was the scintillating account of Mozart’s great D minor piano with Fei-Fei Dong as pianist. The world now has a great many fine pianists who have Chinese backgrounds; Fei-Fei Dong is one of them.

Educated principally in the United States, and doing very well on the competition circuit, Dong is at the beginning of what promises to be a very fine career. In her technical perfection and easy, beguiling musicality, she shows some similarities to the great Yuja Wang, a pianist well known to Calgary audiences.

But Dong has her own individuality and is no pianistic clone. Risking a bit of fancy here and there, she performed the concerto not only with impressive technical mastery but with a certain improvisatory touch, one that kept one waiting for the next phase, the next passage. And as brilliant as she was in the framing movements, her performance of the lyrical slow romanze movement was sheer poetry.

In response to the considerable applause and standing ovation, Dong performed the Volodos paraphrase of Mozart’s Turkish March, a piece filled with eye-popping virtuoso licks and tremendous high spirits: Mozart at his most manic. With her genial manner, and tremendous evident abilities as a pianist, Dong will be welcomed back when she returns to Calgary — as is sure to be the case.