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Review: Lang Lang w/ ASO@Johnny Mercer Theatre

by Jim Morekis

Those expecting over-the-top showmanship may have been very briefly disappointed at Chinese piano superstar Lang Lang's comparatively understated theatricality Thursday night with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra to open the 2010 Savannah Music Festival.

But the music that came from his fingertips -- subtle, sublime, almost impossibly liquid and beguiling -- quickly made everyone forget.

Coming onstage with his trademark gelled fauxhawk and a black shirt under his black tuxedo, the 27-year-old prodigy -- looking more like 12, to be honest -- proceeded to give a deeply sensitive and moving performance of Chopin's Piano Concerto Number Two which completely contradicted his critical reputation for youthful heavy-handedness.

I've always equated Chopin with the sound of water, and Lang Lang at times seemed to approach his piano more like a fountain than a bunch of wood and wire. That said, this was no exercise in borderline New Age tinkle-tinkle music, into which so many modern Chopin performances tend to devolve.

One of the key differences between great musicians and the merely very good ones is retaining enormous sensitivity and control while playing at a high volume. Lang Lang combined finger speed with a brilliant, crystalline clarity of tone that made his instrument really cut through the mix and take centerstage, aurally as well as visually.

The first half of the program was devoted to the ASO's performance of Tchaikovsky's Symphony Number Five. Robert Spano reminded me once again why he is my favorite conductor in the world, displaying his usual mastery of dynamics and an understanding of shifting tempos that often results in something approaching actual swing -- a rare commodity indeed at a classical concert!

While the piece itself is far from perfect -- there's an annoying series of false endings, typical of the composer -- this was a performance that showed why the ASO must still be considered perhaps the best of the nation's second tier of orchestras.

A particularly delightful aspect of this evening was the apparent comeback of what was once utterly taboo in the classical music world: Clapping between movements.

Ten years ago clapping between movements would get you glared out of the building. But more and more audiences -- either through enlightenment or simply not knowing any better -- have brought back this original, historically correct way to show appreciation (classical musicians love it).

The only downside to the evening was the atrocious signage, or lack thereof, at the sadly outdated Johnny Mercer Theatre. One would think a 40-year-old venue would be able to find the time to put up some token explanatory signage to help patrons make their way to their seats in a timely fashion. But no.

Concertgoers headed for seats in the mezzanine, such as yours truly, found themselves having to do eeny-meeny-miney-moe to pick a line, inevitably finding out too late that they needed to cross the entire width of the mezzanine -- against the traffic of the other half of similarly misplaced patrons -- to get to their seats.

There was much grumbling about this snafu from audience members, and the confusion was so acute that Spano had to hold the seated orchestra, bows at the ready, for at least five minutes waiting on the crowd to finally be able to sit down.

While this didn't affect the quality of the ensuing performance one iota, it's something that desperately needs addressing.