

SYMPHONY REVIEW

Santa Rosa Symphony / Saturday, January 11, 2014

Enrique Arturo Diemecke, conductor. Wu Man, pipa

Pipa Virtuoso Wu Man



PIPA PASSES, WITH FLYING COLORS

by [Steve Osborn](#)

A typical symphony concert features a visiting soloist who plays a concerto by a well-known composer. For its Jan. 11-13 concert set at the Green Music Center, the Santa Rosa Symphony augmented that tradition by offering not only a visiting soloist, but also a visiting conductor, an exotic instrument and a concerto by a relatively unknown contemporary composer. The soloist was Wu Man, the conductor was Enrique

Diemecke, the instrument was a Chinese pipa, and the concerto was by Zhao Jiping, a Chinese composer born in 1945 and mostly known for his film music, including "Raise the Red Lantern" and "Farewell My Concubine."

The pipa is one of many variants on the guitar or mandolin. It has four strings, like a mandolin, but it is held in the lap, like a guitar, except that it's held upright, like a double bass. Pipa players cradle their instruments like Renaissance madonnas, the child standing upright in their laps, wrapped in their warm embrace.

Wu Man was the picture of serenity as she seated herself in front of the orchestra in a knee-length green dress and settled the pipa into her arms. Before her stood the music on a stand, along with a microphone that discretely amplified her instrument. Behind her to her left, guest conductor Diemecke--maestro of the Bogota, Buenos Aires, Long Beach and Flint symphonies--summoned the orchestra to begin playing Zhao's concerto in its American premiere.

In two words, the concerto is movie music--but for a great, memorable epic. It has a clear, circular structure, with distinct sections, each evoking a particular narrative. The opening section, for example, is slow and serene, like floating down a lazy river. Wu played the stately theme with great expressivity, but instead of extending each note with a bow, as a violinist would, she let them ring out with rapid plucking from the fingers on her right hand.

Like the mandolin, the pipa depends on repetitive plucking to sustain notes, but the task falls to the fingers rather than to a pick. Wu's digits were a blur of motion as she bent each note to her will, creating a haunting sound that carried over the entire orchestra. The tonal quality was in marked contrast to the bowed cellos, who intoned the main theme.

The majestic opening gradually transitioned to a faster section, where Wu extended her virtuosity to her left hand, running up and down the fingerboard like an overcaffeinated rabbit. Despite its rapidity, the sound she produced was exquisite, every note clearly audible. She then engaged in a wonderful duet with principal cellist Adelle-Akiko Kearns.

And so it went as the concerto circled around to its opening theme, the pipa at the center

of attention, the orchestra providing lush accompaniment, the audience entranced. The standing ovation at the end was immediate and sustained.

The other works on the program somewhat paled in comparison to the excitement of a premiere and an exotic instrument--but not by much. The opener was an early Mozart symphony (No. 15), and the closer was Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony (No. 6), the latter as programmatic in its way as the Zhao concerto.

The Mozart work, written when he was 15 or 16, is a model of clarity, each movement distinct and full of ideas. Diemecke established his presence before the opening, shaking the hands of the front row of strings and then gesturing to the audience with a dramatic sweep. Working without a baton or score, he elicited a precise and well-controlled sound from the orchestra, with his slightest gestures bringing big results. The ritards at the ends of phrases in the opening movement, for example, were both disciplined and evocative.

The somewhat reduced orchestra produced a balanced sound, with a particularly resonant bass. Only occasional ragged entries from the horns detracted from the effect. The playing throughout was luxurious, elegant and upbeat, especially in the final movement, which found Diemecke dancing on the podium and leaping off with the energy of someone several decades younger.

That youthful enthusiasm carried over into the Beethoven symphony, a work significantly longer than the Mozart but embodying much of the same spirit. Again without baton or score, Diemecke launched into the symphony with complete assurance, swaying from side to side and delivering precise cues for each new entry.

For listeners of a certain generation, the Pastoral Symphony is forever linked to Walt Disney's "Fantasia," which transmogrified Beethoven's original country idyll into Greek myth. Diemecke mostly shunned the mythic, settling for a more languid rural pace. At times his tempos seemed to drag, as he tried to milk Beethoven's stately themes to maximum effect. At other points, particularly during the peasant dance and thunderstorm sequences, he propelled the orchestra as fast as it could go.

The overall effect was magical, no matter what story unfolded in the audience's imagination. The playing from the orchestra was superb, notably in the many brass and woodwind solos, and both listeners and musicians seemed fully engaged. A hushed phrase near the end of the final movement captured the spirit of the performance. Diemecke held the orchestra back, creating palpable tension, and then released it for the final, life-affirming bars.