



Spotlight Shines on Two Subterranean Stars

May 26, 2006

By JAY NORDLINGER

A chamber concert on Wednesday night featured two of the most important musicians in New York City - but whom we rarely see. And why do we rarely see them? Because they play in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, hidden away in the pit, night after night. Occasionally they rise to the surface, when the orchestra plays a concert. But normally their work is subterranean.

I am speaking of **David Chan**, the Met's concertmaster, and **Rafael Figueroa**, the principal cello. In many an opera review, I have singled out this cellist for praise. His sound is striking - strikingly beautiful - and his musical sense sure. This city is lucky in its cellists: with Mr. Figueroa at the Met and Carter Brey holding the principal chair in the New York Philharmonic.

But you hardly ever get to applaud Mr. Figueroa, specifically. With his orchestra colleagues, he's packing up and going home, as the evening's soprano is milking the last of the applause.

Well, Messrs. Figueroa and Chan were out of the pit and on the stage of Weill Recital Hall two nights ago, playing their chamber concert under the auspices of MidAmerica Productions. Their program began and ended with a piece for violin and cello alone, and in between they borrowed a pianist: for a Beethoven trio. This was a smart program, and an excellent concert, surely one of the best chamber concerts of the 2005-06 season, now coming to an end.

The concert opened with the sonata of Ravel composed in 1922. We hear plenty of Ravel chamber works - the violin-and-piano sonata, the piano trio, the string quartet - but seldom this violin and cello piece. Which is a pity, because it's one of the composer's most interesting, and most forward-looking, works.

In the first movement, both players were appropriately spare, and they blended nicely. In the second - *Tres vif*, a scherzo - they were aggressive in their pizzicatos, digging into their instruments, practically turning them to dust. But there was also the requisite Gallic slyness.

The third movement is the slow movement, marked *Lento* - and here the two men engaged in pure singing. They issued a seamless stream of song (if you will grant the funny proposition that streams can have seams). Mr. Figueroa, in particular, produced a variety of sounds, all of them right. And in the last movement - a rip-roarer - both players were extremely nimble. They were also suitably rough in tone, lusty - dancing along that jagged edge so characteristic of Ravel. Really, this was top-notch playing.

The Beethoven trio these men chose was one of the nicknamed ones - no, not the Archduke, but the Ghost, the Trio in D major, Op. 70, No. 1.

How did it get that nickname? Theories compete, but, whatever the case, the slow movement is ghostly indeed. For this work, Messrs. Chan and Figueroa incorporated an Israeli pianist, Shai Wosner, who, judging from his bio, has a busy international career.

Things could not have started better. The unison opening - not easy, frequently botched - was absolutely together. And then this first movement continued with what I can only call Beethoven's rippling masculinity, or his muscular, mobile beauty. (Words are so poor when it comes to describing music.) In addition to which, the three players were well-balanced, giving the impression that they were a full-time ensemble, rather than an ad hoc group.

In the second movement - the ghostly one - they were not too emotional, not too indulgent: They knew to play it somewhat cool. They were smart about dynamics, and they caught the music's underlying tensions. The closing movement - *Presto* - was solid and assured.

After intermission, Messrs. Chan and Figueroa presented the second work for violin and cello alone: Kodaly's *Duo*, Op. 7, composed in 1914. According to Susan Halpern's program notes, this was an inspiration to Ravel for that 1922 sonata.

And how did our Met duo play Kodaly's? Let me put it this way: They played it so well, you could sort of forget the performance and think about the music. That is a luxury in the concert hall. The slow movement - *Adagio* - is a kind of sound poem, and Mr. Chan gave us a wonderful liquid tone. The closing movement was both anxious and proud, an interesting (and right) combination. Also, I might say that Mr. Chan knows how to act the Gypsy - every violinist must.

When it was all over, the audience at Weill applauded and yelled as the Met audience might for Aprile Mollo, or Placido. The players obliged with an encore, which Mr. Chan charmingly introduced as a "number": a Handel passacaglia, transcribed. There was a glitch or two here, but in the main the players were thrilling: Their resolution was extraordinary.

David Chan and Rafael Figueroa have stepped into the spotlight before. A few seasons ago, they played Brahms's *Double Concerto* in Carnegie Hall, with the Met Orchestra, under their music director, James Levine. That was a memorable performance (particularly from the cellist). I can't tell you when these guys will play again. But the Met season opens on September 25, with "Madama Butterfly."