

CHRISTOPH VON DOHNANYI

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MUSIC REVIEW

Weekend brings an eclectic mix to Tanglewood

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff | August 9, 2004

LENOX -- There was an unseasonal chill in the air Saturday night, but that didn't stop more than 9,000 people from making their way to Tanglewood to spend some time with cellist Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Project in a program that included a revised version of Tan Dun's "The Map," which the Boston Symphony Orchestra premiered last February.

The first half of the program featured traditional music from the Silk Road and new music composed in traditional styles by composers from along the Silk Road. The most striking of these pieces was "Legend of Herlen," by the Mongolian Byambasuren Sharav, which featured a singer as extraordinary in appearance as she was in voice, Khongorzul Ganbaatar. She swept onstage in gold and crimson silk, wearing a cap that towered at least three feet above her head, crowned with a cluster of full-length peacock feathers. She had to hold it on while bowing.

Her voice was also wide-ranging, piercing in quality, and capable of extraordinary ululations or trills across intervals both narrow and wide. Her epic narrative was accompanied by a chamber ensemble of modern instruments, and Ma played the two-stringed Mongolian fiddle, the morin khuur, as if it were his cello.

The other new piece, "Gallop of a Thousand Horses," by the Iranian Kayhan Kalhor, is based on Turkmen folk melodies; it is fast, soulful, and exciting, like Gypsy or klezmer music.

The other pieces included Armenian folk songs and Gypsy music from Romania and Turkey, all of it colorful, vibrant, and passionate. It was played by a fabulous string quartet -- Ma, violinists Jonathan Gandelsman and Colin Jacobsen, and violist Nicholas Cords -- with Wu Man on the Chinese lute, the pipa, and Mark Suter, percussionist, all of them crudely amplified for the Shed with a lot of snap, crackle, and pop -- one wished this part of the concert had been in Ozawa Hall.

"The Map" is a roots piece for Tan Dun, a return to the music and traditions of the Hunan province to which the composer was sent during China's Cultural Revolution; he recently returned with video and recording equipment. The piece ambitiously but unevenly mixes field recordings of traditional music with video and Tan's own orchestral music, which serves as a kind of ongoing, elegiac commentary, led by Ma's cello. It is colorful, entertaining, touching, and exciting; for all its surface brilliance, it also feels touristy and even a bit exploitative.

Since the Boston premiere, the composer has cut one whole movement and made other trims, which tightens things up, but he has not addressed the central problem, the lack of some kind of musical summation. "The Map" still offers pictures without an exhibition catalog, except for a bit of explanatory prose that rolls across the screen at one point, prose that would not be necessary if the music were completely doing its job.

Friday's distinguished concert was led by Christoph von Dohnanyi, who opened with a glowing and expressive performance of Schumann's Second Symphony, so beautifully organized that it sounded spontaneous. Yefim Bronfman was soloist in a heroic and spacious performance of Brahms's Second Piano Concerto. **Dohnanyi and the orchestra matched depth and weight with transparency.** Bronfman may not enjoy the mystique, glamour, and publicity that surround some younger pianists, but none of them can yet offer the stamina, tonal splendor, and depth of musicianship that he does. Jules Eskin contributed a direct, heartfelt cello solo in the slow movement.

A sunny afternoon yesterday proved that Mozart is even more popular than Yo-Yo Ma; 10,486 people showed up for an all-Mozart program lacking in star power but not in quality. Christof Perick led shapely performances of the Wind Serenade in C-Minor and the "Jupiter" Symphony -- the conductor pursued human and expressive qualities rather than striving for a chilly perfection.

Soloist in the Piano Concerto (K. 482) was Christian Zacharias, an important European pianist who infrequently plays hereabout. In the past, he has sometimes seemed a bit precious, but yesterday he played with feeling, style, and spunk, creating his own elegant ornamentation and cadenzas, the first of which deftly brought the solo woodwinds in to play with him.