

TODAY'S ZAMAN

I nominate Akbank Chamber Orchestra for 'Most Creative Programming'

I love the Akbank Chamber Orchestra's approach to their monthly concerts.

Most classical series, ensembles (including touring orchestras) and soloists seem to feel they should present the most popular works from the top 10 classical potboilers (music by Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, etc.). Like a breath of fresh air, Akbank dares to offer the relatively unknown, the esoteric, the surprising and amazing jewels that have been ignored or have escaped the attention of the less curious of the classical



concert world. While I certainly do not denigrate the greatness of the symphonies of Mozart, the operas of Verdi or the piano works of Chopin, it would be nice to have the Western polyphonic concert life here in realistic balance with itself and with a wider perspective for audiences. The Akbank Chamber Orchestra has come to the rescue.

Fascinating film music

In the same way the Hollywood film industry loves to reward itself, İstanbul's musical community should award conductor Cem Mansur a "Most Creative Concert Programming" prize. Maybe a gold statue bearing a baton? His program for the Akbank Chamber Orchestra is truly imaginative and a unique educational service to the public. It's not dry academic fare at all; on the contrary, he unearths buried musical treasures and weaves them together with a clever theme. Their concert at the Cemal Reşit Rey Concert Hall on Feb. 25 was a wonderful example: "In Front of the Curtain, Behind the Curtain" (or perhaps another translation of "Perdenin Önü, Arkası" -- "Onstage, Backstage") was the title of the program, which took music from films originally composed to accompany action on the screen but could also stand on their own as viable concert music. Beginning with a brief chat with the audience beforehand, Mansur typically sets the stage with fascinating facts about the music, the composers, the behind-the-scenes stuff that whets our appetites for hearing the scores. For this program, he talked about film music historically, from silent films of the 1920s to the later work of directors Elia Kazan ("On the Waterfront") and Federico Fellini ("La Dolce Vita") and famous film composers like Max Steiner ("Gone With the Wind"), Erich Korngold ("Between Two Worlds"), John Williams ("Star Wars") and Nino Rota ("The Godfather").

From those film composers, Mansur selected Concerto for Strings by Nino Rota, who wrote for Fellini, Francis Ford Coppola and Franco Zeffirelli. But first, the concert began with three pieces for Japanese films by Toru Takemitsu, who wrote over 100 movie scores, largely for the films of Akira Kurosawa. And here was the curious surprise: I expected a Far East inflected soundscape from Takemitsu but instead heard slightly saccharine blues that might have accompanied a troubled romance set in a Los Angeles bar in the 1940s. Following that jazzy mood came a mysterious and foreboding score that evoked

another “film noir” scenario, then a sweeping and passionate waltz. Takemitsu’s captivating music made me want to see the films for which they were written. (One was “Black Rain” [1989], by Shohei Imamura.)

‘Red Violin’ score featured

The main course of the evening’s musical meal was “The Red Violin Concerto” from the 1998 film “The Red Violin,” and for which composer John Corigliano received an Academy Award in 1999 for Best Original Score. Violinist Lara St. John graced the stage with her performance of Corigliano’s gripping music for the tale of the changing ownership of an unusual 17th century Italian violin. St. John sang the solo as if she were a soprano and expressed her emotion like an actress; from the beginning silent moments with her eyes closed to the virtuoso ending, she was fully involved in the drama and supplied spine-tingling wizardry on the four strings. At a few points, she took wide dancer steps as she made her musical points as a formidable interpreter of this compelling work. It’s in three sections: a chaconne, a suite and then the actual concerto from the film. In addition to all the stringed instruments, the composer added a vibraphone, harp and percussion; the last made its presence known with a blood-curdling rim shot which interrupted her cadenza (solo improvisation), as an example of the music’s intense descriptive power that painted a fascinating journey of the lives of people who had played the red violin over three centuries -- and why the violin was red (I don’t want to give away this secret in case you haven’t seen the film). For an encore, St. John rewarded us with the Gavotte from Bach’s Partita No. 3 in E major BWV 1006, an exacting but joyous dance which she tossed off with the utmost delicacy.

Four delightful idylls came after the intermission: two selections from William Walton’s music for the 1944 film version of Shakespeare’s “Henry V” and two well-known excerpts from Edvard Grieg’s “Peer Gynt” -- all performed with pristine style and tonal allure. Then Rota’s four-movement concerto, sporting very Fellini-esque associations, whimsical and macabre dances, elegiac textures and a Shostakovich-style blizzard of percussive and stark figures in the final section. One could almost envision Italian village life and its madcap melodramas in Rota’s colorful scores; it’s clear why the three great Italian moviemakers chose him as their composer. Concertmaster Hakan Şensoy delivered especially silvery solos within this piece, and cellist Şafak Erişkin splendidly negotiated some angular and striking solo passages in the Corigliano.

Akbank Chamber Orchestra’s next concert on March 24 at Caddebostan Cultural Center and on March 25 at Cemal Reşit Rey is titled “Ayrı Dünyaların İnsanları,” or “People From Different Worlds,” featuring a marimba (a giant wooden keyboard played with mallets) concerto played by British percussionist Colin Currie. Don’t miss it. www.akbanksanat.com

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