

MUSIC REVIEW

'Concerto Night' anything but traditional

By HILLARY HAUSER

The Music Academy of the West's "Concerto Night" is the traditional close of its summer session, a sampler and summary of all the high-caliber music-making the students do for two and a half months beginning in June.

But this year's edition of Concerto Night, held at the Lobero Theatre recently, was anything but traditional. It was heart-stopping and mind-boggling. And it contained a couple of performances so haunting and so intense they will not be forgotten easily, if ever, by those who heard them.

The formula for Concerto Night is basic: Academy students participate in a monthlong judged competition, out of which winners are awarded soloist positions on an evening program. This year there were six winners: Amy Brough (oboe), Barnabas Kelemen (violin), Zuill Bailey (cello), Scott Lee (viola), Michi Wiancko (violin) and David Wolff (piano). These gifted young artists were to perform various chunks of concerto pieces with the 100-member Festival Orchestra — which was led beautifully and perfectly by Christopher Wilkins, the talented 37-year-old music director of the San Antonio (Texas) and Colorado Springs symphonies.

Wilkins got the evening under

way with a lively, masterful reading of Rossini's Overture to "The Barber of Seville," keeping things at a crisp, energetic pace while maintaining cohesive tension. Amy Brough then took the stage for the Allegro aperto movement of Mozart's Oboe Concerto in C major (K 314). The 16-year-old Salt Lake City native gave a thrilling performance of breathtaking long, long lines of octave leaps, trills and two-note phrases.

This was followed by 16-year-old Hungarian violinist Barnabas Kelemen performing with romantic flair — and pronounced virtuosic tendencies — two movements from the popular B-minor violin concerto of Camille Saint-Saens. Another violinist, 18-year-old Michi Wiancko, later in the program did wonderful, poetic justice to the first movement of Prokofiev's G-minor violin concerto, a somber work whose graceful, flowing melodies belie its difficulties.

Scott Lee, a 15-year-old Taiwanese violist who began studying the instrument only two years ago (at USC, with Donald McInnes), gave an exquisite performance (on a borrowed Bergonzi instrument) of two movements of William Walton's complex Concerto for Viola and Orchestra. All along, conductor Wilkins admirably and skillfully kept the orchestra on a keenly balanced vocal edge that alternated between artful, bravura solo and

sensitive accompaniment.

There was all this and heaven, too — in the form of Zuill Bailey and David Wolff.

Just before intermission, cellist Bailey took the stage for the Allegro guista movement of Prokofiev's symphony-concerto in E minor for Cello and Orchestra. This 22-year-old artist, now a student at the Peabody Institute and about to enter Juilliard, has already performed with many orchestras as soloist, has won numerous prizes and competitions, and has been featured at prestigious music festivals. He was a "Concerto Night" performer in 1990, when he attended the Music Academy as first recipient of the Gabor Rejto Scholarship.

Only a few bars into the Prokofiev concerto, it was easy to see why this young musician with the Grecian good looks has received the acclaim he has: he had his listeners immediately on the edge of their seats. Closing his eyes, he shut out the rest of the world, became one with the cello, one with the music, one with Prokofiev. There could have been 5,000 people watching him, or one; to him it did not seem to matter. It is the rare artist who successfully captivates his listeners by so completely blocking them out, which is, in essence, the soul of intimacy, a complete nakedness almost hard to watch. An onlooker cannot help but feel himself an intruder.

Nevertheless, one watched Bailey, transfixed. And heard things pour from his cello as if from his heart, all the love and beauty and pain anyone could possibly conceive. The astonishing virtuosic technique was there, too, but it was secondary to Bailey's message: Prokofiev's last work, composed a year before death while ill and in great pain, now here on the Lobero stage in all its raw, intense hurt. It was a transforming musical experience.

Something similarly electrifying happened in the performance of pianist David Wolff, who closed Concerto Night with the final (Alla breve) movement from Rachmaninoff's Third piano concerto. The technical difficulties of this concerto, the last movement in particular, is feared by all pianists; the great Josef Hoffmann, to whom the work is dedicated, never performed it, and in his recent U.S. tour, Van Cliburn repeatedly omitted it (for who knows what reasons) from his printed programs. Rachmaninoff wrote the concerto for his first tour of America, to show off his keyboard prowess, which was legendary, and therein lies the clue to

its difficulty.

With all this before him, the 19-year-old pianist Wolff, now studying on full scholarship at the University of Washington, took up the formidable challenge with superinduced calm and artful grappling with the difficulty of starting cold — the third movement out of thin air, no heroic Rachmaninoffian meanderings to work oneself up to impending thunder. Wolff did all this with lovely lyricism and soaring romanticism.

Then, he took off his jacket. Sure, it was a warm night and the bright lights of the stage made it warmer, but it was as if Wolff said to himself, O.K., this has all been fine and good, but now I'm getting down to real business. An orchestral *tutti* (solo), gave him the opportunity to calmly bench, and when his piano entrance came up he was ready to go.

He went wild.

Not in an out-of-control sudden leap, but by sustained, rhythmic surges of intensity, with soaring lines peeling away layers of underlying passion that rushed for open air and ignited into some roaring flame that erupted volcano-like. It became demonic and superhuman, and at the ends of many of the most explosive passages a shudder could be seen going through Wolff's body like an electric charge. As it had happened with cellist Bailey, the audience seemed gone for Wolff, too. The scene became intensely personal, sensuous, again nearly impossible to watch, and spellbinding. The audience went into an uproar, and those who were there are still talking about it.

The summer of 1994 seems to have been exceptionally strong for the academy, from its enormous, swift kickoff that had world-loved tenor Thomas Hampson leading a vocal master class in June, to the closing Concerto Night. Attendance was packed at all Academy performances, from the public master classes to the Faculty Chamber Concerts, to the Concerto Night (oversold by about 50 tickets). Even at \$95 per ticket, the unpublicized "Cabaret Night" vocal wrap party was sold out far in advance. It seems an increasing public is understanding more and more what special talents are being nurtured, and showcased, within the hallowed halls of the Miraflores campus.

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