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CONCERT REVIEW HHHH

Violinist puts her graceful touch on Mozart

By Tom Manoff For The Register-Guard

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Bin Huang, a wonderful violinist, was the guest soloist with the Oregon Mozart Players on Saturday at the Hult Center's Soreng Theatre in a performance of Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5 in A Major, K.196. The program was repeated Sunday at the Hult's Jacqua Concert Hall.

Compared with the standard concerto repertoire, this work isn't especially difficult from a technical stance, though it's clear that Huang has plenty of prowess on the strings — she's won several important prizes in her career, among them the International Paganini Competition.

No, the challenge of this concerto, as in all Mozart, is musicality — the ability to tap into what is basic and true about music. Mozart can be successful with various interpretive styles, but all must arise from a "Mozart sensibility." You can't bring too much ego to Mozart without sounding pretentious. However lofty it may seem, Mozart's music calls for a pureness of mind and heart.

Huang has the Mozart gift, and it begins with her beautiful violin sound. Her perfect intonation is made more pristine by the absence of a throbbing vibrato. She favors a more refined vibrato, which allows her legato to sing with haunting purity. Huang goes for the "long line" in phrasing, articulating melodies naturally and with ease, and in a way that never breaks up the melodic flow.

Mercifully, Huang doesn't indulge in onstage swooning and weaving, those showy, sometimes silly gyrations that many soloists pursue these days. She's a graceful presence, moving naturally with the music, and with an elegance one remembers from the great violinists of some 50 years back.

She is a remarkable interpreter of Mozart, as good as I've heard in many years. I returned Sunday to hear her a second time, and she sounded even more glorious in the vibrant acoustics of Jacqua Concert Hall.

These concerts were my first chance to hear Glen Cortese conduct the Mozart Players, and it was immediately clear that he has raised the level of their playing significantly. The winds and brass were very good, most often in tune, and with considerable attention to phrasing — an attribute sometimes in short supply around this town. The strings have flourished with the leadership of concertmaster Alice Blankenship, a fine player with a decisive sense of expressive phrasing. Not everybody follows her, but when they do, the string sound is cohesive, and at times, full-bodied.

The strings are not without weakness. Flubs, poor intonation and even some wrong notes in the violas and second violins marred Saturday's performance. Things went a bit better Sunday, though not enough to allay concern. I say this not to nit-pick unfairly, and had not the overall level of this ensemble risen so dramatically, I wouldn't consider mentioning these problems useful. But the Oregon Mozart Players are one of Eugene's resident performing companies. It's not only reasonable but important that they are shown the respect of an honest review.

Cortese and his orchestra were at their best in the Violin Concerto, especially on the Sunday performance.

The other works on the program were not as successful. Mozart's overture to his early opera "La finta giardiniera," K.196, is a wisp of a piece, and doesn't work for me as a stand-alone.

Mozart's Symphony in G minor, K.550, was programmed perhaps as the emotional counterweight to the Violin Concerto. Although both performances of the symphony were intense and spirited, for my taste, they were overworked with emotional content, which also resulted in too much density of sound. The genius of this symphony, especially of its so-called emotional turbulence, is that this "heaviness" reaches us through gracefulness and transparency of sound and structure. Playing Mozart is hard work. But the final challenge is to play Mozart without any sense of that work, to glide effortlessly into its grace.

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Tom Manoff is the classical music critic for National Public Radio's "All Things Considered."

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