

NBSO's final applicant chooses most difficult route

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By Keith Powers, Contributing Writer

The auditions are over — and it's made for quite an interesting year. Now comes the decision.

Dirk Meyer made his case to become the next music director of the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra Saturday evening, leading a bracing program of del Águila, Beethoven and Rachmaninov at the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center.

The fourth and final music director hopeful, Meyer picked a program long on challenges, one that stretched his presumptive orchestra physically and musically.

Aided by a terrific piano soloist, Sheng Cai, who joined the NBSO for Beethoven's third piano concerto, this program capped a whirlwind series of concerts for the orchestra and its conductor hopefuls.

Meyer, music director of the Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra, has worked with Miguel del Águila in the past. Uruguayan born, now a long-time resident of Los Angeles, del Águila's "The Giant Guitar" stylistically evokes the grim political changes that have occurred in South America during the composer's lifetime.

The work, really one single crescendo, plays larger than its scant seven or eight minutes. A flute duet (principal Timothy Macri, Vanessa Holroyd) sets a pastorale Andean mood, familiar and reassuring.

That gentle setting gets smashed, with horn fanfares and martial-sounding percussion — eventually including police whistle and sirens — overwhelming the opening. A dramatic rendering of authoritarian politics — this time through music — del Águila's setting is rough and effective.

Meyer's familiarity with its challenges and tension was obvious.

Meyer had not worked with piano soloist Sheng Cai — but after this performance, here's betting that he will again. There was much to like about this performance.

A long orchestral introduction at the outset belies the nature of Beethoven's C minor concerto — much of the tempo, and dynamics, get determined by the soloist. The first movement had some balance issues — short solos in the wind section were sometimes barely audible. But by the time Sheng unleashed the long cadenza, with its shifting dynamics, momentum had been firmly established.

Unlike the opening, the soloist dictates the tempo of the second movement Largo, and Sheng slowed everything down. Introspective, deeply felt, Sheng carved out a personal sounding approach to the movement. Meyer had the orchestra alert to his leadership, and followed astutely.

A much different tempo, but a similar result, sparked the finale. By the time soloist and ensemble reached the impossibly virtuosic coda, the audience expected — and received — nothing but excellence.

Say this about Meyer's audition program — he didn't choose the easy stuff. Concluding with Rachmaninov's second symphony, Meyer taxed his orchestra with one of the most demanding works in the repertory.

In fact, if it weren't for the impossibly Romantic third movement melody — stolen so many times in popular settings — this symphony might be deemed unplayable.

The challenges come in making sense of many of the discrete phrases in the outer movements, phrases that overlap, are hard to articulate, and certainly hard to balance.

Balances were sometimes askew; the lower winds especially were hard to distinguish at times. But thanks to that unforgettable melody, passed around endlessly in the third movement, and making one last appearance in the finale, the symphony wins over its listeners.

All programs are not equal, and judging the conductor finalists based on one evening's experience seems inappropriate. Meyer certainly chose the most challenging program of the season, but also performed with the most electrifying soloist of the season. A tricky choice faces the selection committee.

The NBSO's season finale, conducted by Ken-David Masur, celebrates the music of John Williams. The performance is Saturday, April 29 at 7:30 in the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center. For information and tickets visit www.nbsymphony.org or call the Z box office at 508-994-2900.
