

Anton Kuerti, Pianist**Columbus Dispatch, By Barbara Zuck, May 11, 2008****Musicians captivate even amid turmoil**

A large crowd filled the Ohio Theatre last night to hear the Columbus Symphony argue a strong case on its own behalf with a vigorous, engrossing performance of three masterpieces of the repertoire. Music Director Junichi Hirokami appeared determined to extract the most and the best from the orchestra with the result that very little sounded routine. The small maestro is an invigorating presence on the podium. The opening reading of Beethoven's famous *Egmont Overture* suitably evoked angst and inner tumult. Brass and horns played with such force and conviction that it sounded as though more players were actually onstage.

A gorgeous oboe solo at the opening of the Schumann *Piano Concerto in A Minor* was sensitively matched down to the details by featured soloist Anton Kuerti. The guest artist, who perches over the keyboard like a piano inspector, played with an assurance that approached formality at times. One also would have appreciated a more tender *andantino*.

Kuerti's command of the virtuosic challenges, though, was admirable throughout. Even the formidable parallel octaves were dispatched with force and certainty.

Many symphonies have strongly contrasting movements, and some composers seem to have gone out of their way to "vive la difference." Mendelssohn's *Symphony No. 3* ("Scottish") is not among them. Save for the bouncy main theme of the second movement, each major melody seems almost like a variant of the one before it. The overall character of the piece is one of a pervasive melancholy that hangs in the air like a Scottish mist (fulfilling yet one more stereotype of the supposed national character).

Last night's reading initially made a strong impression, with a searching interpretation of the opening slow section and a suitably agitated reading of the main theme. Principal clarinet David Thomas played the famous scherzo theme with vigor and bounce and the third movement was expressed with the utmost poignance and beauty, sung by the orchestra like the lovely song it is. Oddly, though, the finale became pushed and ultimately seemed to go on automatic pilot.

The orchestra's recent problems -- budget-balancing issues of dimensions that are currently unclear, a canceled summer season and its possible impending demise -- appear to have done nothing to discourage audiences. Attendance has been strong at classical concerts all season and last night's crowd, like many in recent months, appeared close to capacity.

Kuerti's local following might have been to thank, at least in part. But the orchestra's own popularity, ironically, appears to be on the rise at the moment, whatever the reasons for the orchestra's stated budgetary problems, they no longer appear to be principally from lack of an appreciative audience.