

Barani and Oakway triumph

By TIM RICHARD

Sometimes I sympathize with music directors who feel it's mandatory to have a soloist or a featured attraction for every concert. Why not an all-orchestral program?

The answer came at the Oakway Symphony Orchestra's Dec. 2 subscription concert. The answer is audiences.

There was a standing ovation and multiple curtain calls for pianist Flavio Varani, who deserved them for his inspired rendering of Beethoven's "Emperor" concerto. There was perfunctory applause for the orchestra and its individual soloists after an equally-good "Scheherazade" by Rimsky-Korsakov.

VARANI, ARTIST in residence at Oakland University, has graced many a suburban concert and recital hall. His technique is unquestionable good.

Beethoven's Concerto No. 5 in E flat for piano and orchestra requires more than technique. There are messages, which is why its admirers have long dubbed it "Emperor." It may indeed represent the Everest of 18th and 19th century concerto composition.

Varani treated it that way. Nuances, dramatic phrases in the music, dramatic physical gestures, messages of rebellion and the majesty of the soul — Beethoven wrote them all in, and Varani brought them all out. To praise more would be to gild the orchid.

Invariably I like the way Conductor Francesco DiBlasi handles accompaniment. A simple example: In the closing section of the first movement, Varani kicked up the tempo; the conductor caught the message without as much as a glance and conveyed it to the orchestra. That's quality.

I would quibble with Varani's fast pace in the last half of the second movement. "Repose" is the essence of the adagio movement. (The performer's) function is expressive rather than exhibitionistic," say the program notes. My antique Horowitz recording is all adagio in the second movement, and I couldn't see what Varani gained by rushing it.

That's only a quibble.

AS PRESIDENT and chief executive officer of the Victoria Halton Fan Club, I get a two-hour clinic in violin performance as well as a concert when Oakway's new concertmaster appears.

Her posture is better than the textbook's — the most elegant posture I have seen since Chicago concertmaster Sidney Harth. The fiddle is cocked up, the right elbow is high, the right wrist is higher than the bow, the back is straight and away from the chair, the feet aren't crossed.

If there is a young fiddler in your family, for goodness' sake take him or her to the next Oakway concert (Feb.

24) and point out the red-head to the left of the conductor.

Posture is absolutely critical to getting the right sound out of the violin. Most amateur fiddlers have the left arm against their rib cage, as if the instrument were a telephone pole, and their right elbow drops to beltline. That's why so many string sections sound so mediocre.

Ms. Halton had sold in all four movements of "Scheherazade" for the violin portrays the feminine guile of the heroine. The third movement contains some of the trickiest bounce-bowing this side of a Paganini concerto, the kind of stuff that makes beginning fiddlers weep.

Her tone is stunning and alluring. If the Sultan Schahbari were as wise as he was omniscient, he would trade in the story-telling Scheherazade for the Oakway concertmaster.

But lest I get carried away, let it here be observed there were other instrumentalists worthy of more applause than they got: principal cellist Paul DiBlasi, violinist Pamela Hill, principal oboeist Paul Jackson, principal clarinetist Thomas Johnson, bassoonist Juan deGomar, principal French hornist Stuart Dehany, trumpeter Tony Bangs and new harpist Patricia Terry (Ms. Hill, incidentally, is a sister of Ms. Halton and is responsible for recruiting her.)

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ing the playing of the Chorus, as is traditional.

MUCH OF "The Messiah" follows the same pattern. It is light, jaunty and triumphant, to symbolize the feelings of the Christian world as the birth of Christ approaches.

When words are sung, they are often repeated, enabling listeners to concentrate on differences in harmony and blending as each phrase is heard.

Tenor Phillip Mooney, who teaches voice at Dearborn High School, second and third movements of "The Messiah." His rich voice and cheerful appearance made "Comfort Ye, My People" and "Every Valley Shall Be Exalted" come alive for his audience.

Carroll Strickland, who has appeared with numerous groups in the Detroit area, sang four movements in the first half of the performance. These were "Thus Saith the Lord," "But Who May Abide the Day of His Coming?" "For Behold, Darkness Shall Cover the Earth" and "The People That Walked in Darkness."

Strickland's voice is powerful and very disciplined, as is Handel's music. Arlene Kornig, a church soloist and

Marie Koenig has a strong, sweet voice that rises clearly above the background of orchestra and chorus.

Two movements toward the end of the program, "Then Shall the Eyes of the Blind be Opened" and "He Shall Feed His Flock Like a Shepherd," were sung by both Ms. Irvine and Ms. Koenig. The contrast and blending of the two voices was pleasing.

Between soloists, the Rochester Community Chorus sang several movements. The choir has a lovely, full sound which added to the excitement of the performance, especially during the singing of the "Hallelujah Chorus" which climaxed the program.

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By NANCY MAZZARA

Do you feel hurried and hassled by the holiday season, with all its preparations? Do you need some inspiration to get into the true spirit of Christmas?

Listening to George Frederick Handel's "The Messiah" is an uplifting experience, and its performance Friday night at Rochester High School's auditorium had enough spirit for everyone.

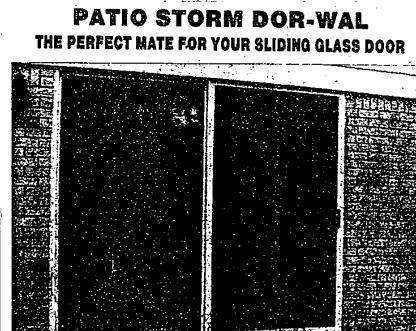
Long-time Rochester resident and musical leader Frank Irish directed the 50-piece concert with the Rochester Symphony and the Rochester Community Chorus.

Featured were four soloists: soprano Mary Irvine, mezzo-soprano Arlene Koenig, tenor Philip Mooney, and bass Carroll Strickland. Margaret Kloepfer played harpsichord and organ.

The auditorium stage was full of performers, with soloists in front and the orchestra and chorus behind them. Decorations of red poinsettias were done by an area woman.

Handel's "The Messiah" is divided into 22 movements. The first is the "Overture" while the last is the famous "Hallelujah Chorus". The audience at the nearly sold-out concert stood dur-

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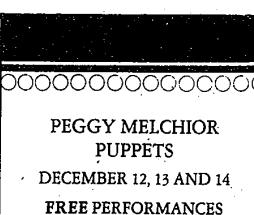
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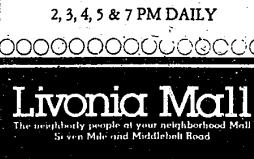
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