

## San Francisco Symphony — Crouching Tigers, Gentle Dragons

by Dr. Gary Lemco

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**Francoise-Xavier Roth**

Making his debut with the San Francisco Symphony, guest conductor Francoise-Xavier Roth led a spectacularly successful concert Saturday, March 9 at Davies Hall of music by Schumann, Liszt, and Brahms. The relatively traditional, Romantic fare had the benefit of French pianist Cedric Tiberghien in the solo part of Liszt's explosive Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major. Tiberghien's remarkable panache in the Concerto warranted one encore, at which conductor Roth sat thoughtfully, the *Oiseaux tristes* from Ravel's set of *Miroirs*.

Roth opened with a driven, committed performance of the 1849 *Manfred Overture* by Robert Schumann, a dramatic work conceived after the spirit of Lord Byron's 1817 poem, in which a tormented protagonist seeks death as an antidote for some unnamed sin responsible for the death of his sister, Astarte. Darkly evolved in E-flat Minor, the piece bears many of the late-Schumann characteristics: obsessive thematic repetition and haunted tropes that eventually find their way to the tonic major at the coda. Conductor Roth took the unusual step – for the SFO – of having divided the first and second violins clear across the stage to effect the spatial antiphons that Schumann – and later Brahms – would exploit. Without baton, Roth jogged and dipped and crouched at the podium to deliver the dramatic and sonic evocations in Schumann's notion of his "dramatic monologue."

No less intensely concentrated, his back arched as he delved into and above his keyboard, pianist Cedric Tiberghien rendered a marvelously acute performance of the Liszt First Concerto, over which the composer labored between 1839-1956 to obtain its final form. Typically of Liszt's inheritance from Franz Schubert, his one-movement concerto subdivides onto four identifiable sections, alternately aggressive and subjectively lyrical. Of course, the last two movements feature Liszt's innovative use of the triangle as a sound component, playful and alluring. The various transformations of the opening, martial motif, waggishly inscribed – a la Hans von Bulow – *Das versteht Ihr alle nicht, haha!* – that

none of us understands, Tiberghien addressed with alternately chordal splendor and the most nuanced pianissimos, as required. The crossed-hands accompaniment to the clarinet, oboe, solo violin, and later the soaring cascades of scale passages against blaring trumpets and trombones, set the house afire in ecstasies of passion, intimacy, or triumph. At times, the solo part assumed the role of a nocturnal cadenza; at other moments, the *diablerie* of the *Totentanz* loomed nigh.

Rarely do we experience the Brahms Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73 (1877), in the scale delivered by Roth and the SFO, with the first movement's repeat intact. Essentially a sunny work, much in the spirit of the Beethoven Pastoral Symphony, the first movement – with its three-note motto – assumed a grand expanse, lyrical yet poignant with the underlying sense of tragic grandeur. The rhythmic shifts and emotional urgencies of the piece sang most fluently, as they would again in the second movement *Adagio non troppo*, with its rising bassoon motif, countered by the cellos' descent. The woodwind passages reminded us of the first of the two Brahms serenades, that in D Major, Op. 11, for its transparency of texture. By now, our appreciation of conductor Roth's ability to balance his various voice choirs had impressed for their homogeneity of effect. The oboe with string pizzicatos pronounced the procession from the third movement, *Allegretto quasi andantino*, a stately intermezzo with two trios. Finally, the last movement emerged from a quiet melody in the strings, rising by degrees to a triumphant and blazing peroration on a firmly mounted tonic D, grounded by the trombones. Fellow composer – and sullen critic – Hugo Wolf had once vaunted that Brahms "cannot exult." But the performance from conductor Roth and the ever-responsive San Francisco Symphony put the lie or the canard to a permanent rest.

End

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