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Review: Pianist George Li, 12, celebrates Mendelssohn's bicentennial

BY LAWRENCE A. JOHNSON



The Miami Symphony Orchestra's programming has grown more conservative over the last two seasons, but Eduardo Marturet still manages to provide a couple of evenings each year that stray from populist fare. Such was the case Sunday night at the Lincoln Theatre, with a varied program that offered a spectacular Mendelssohn performance by a young keyboard prodigy and works of Webern and Mahler.

Tackling such intensely demanding music would have been unthinkable for the MSO just a few seasons ago, but the charismatic Marturet clearly likes to challenge his players with difficult repertoire, as was the case Sunday with Mahler's Symphony No. 4.

The most concise of the composer's symphonies, the Fourth is characteristic in its offbeat elements -- with the weird, faux-cheerful sleigh bells of the opening movement and the Mephistophelian grotesquerie of the scherzo with its "mistuned" scordatura solo violin. The Adagio breathes a deeply felt lyrical expression, leading to the radiant vocal finale. Here a soprano soloist sings a text from Mahler's favorite folk poetry reflecting a child's view and relating -- a bit ironically -- of the joy and feasts that await in heaven.

Marturet's emotional temperament is well suited to such mercurial music, and the Venezuelan conductor showed an assurance with and affinity for the symphony's oddities as well as for its heartfelt lyricism. There were untidy moments with errant wind tuning and some ensemble slips, but, on the whole, this was an impressive and worthy performance.

Soprano Susana Diaz possesses the right youthful voice and an intelligent sense of the German text to convey the poetry's naive joy. Yet, the glowing finale didn't quite come

off, due to the Lincoln Theatre's voice-bleaching acoustic, which robbed Diaz's words and light soprano of clarity and impact.

The Felix Mendelssohn anniversary -- Feb. 3 was his 200th birthday -- was well served by the evening's centerpiece, his Piano Concerto No. 1 with the extraordinary 12-year-old soloist George Li in the spotlight. One can become cynical about the extravagant claims made for the latest "incredible" preteen *wunderkind*, but this young man is the real thing.

The diminutive Li looks even younger than his years, yet he ripped into Mendelssohn's keyboard showpiece with the flash and digital bravura of a seasoned veteran. Rarely will one hear so young an artist throw off the knuckle-busting runs and flurry of notes with such swagger and assurance. Li also displayed a refined poetic sensibility in the cadenza and Andante, phrased with nuanced shading and subtle feeling. The concluding Presto was off like a rocket with Marturet and the orchestra providing equally souped-up accompaniment for their young soloist's whirlwind prestidigitation.

Ovations brought the young artist out for two encores, some delicately tinted Chopin and a playfully virtuosic *Flight of the Bumble Bee*.

The evening began with the world premiere of Marturet's orchestral arrangement of Anton Webern's *Langsamer Satz*. Apart from a harp solo, Marturet largely avoids schmaltz and makes a worthy case for Webern's surprisingly soulful outpouring.