

C. Schumann – Piano Concerto (Roger Xia)
Bruckner - Symphony No. 7 (Nowak edition)

Camellia Symphony Orchestra / Christian Baldini

The Camellia Symphony Orchestra, founded in 1962, is the oldest continuously-operating orchestra in Sacramento, California. It has a wide-ranging repertoire that has been expanded even further by its young, exciting music director, Christian Baldini. Born in 1978 in Argentina, Baldini has forged an international reputation in both symphonic and operatic music and is Professor of Music at the University of California, Davis as well as conductor of the UC Davis Symphony Orchestra. He has a flair for the unusual, with a special affinity for the music of such composers as Ginastera (naturally) as well as other moderns like Luigi Dallapiccola. His recent programming has regularly included works by neglected female composers. The Camellia orchestra, which has won multiple ASCAP awards for its adventuresome programming, plays in a surprisingly effective acoustic space, the concert hall in a high school that offers a significant performing arts curriculum.

The concert on Saturday evening February 22 opened with Clara Schumann's Piano Concerto, a work written when the composer was a teenager. Fittingly, it was played by a teenager, the talented Roger Xia, a high school student in nearby Davis, California, also noted for its strong arts and music programs. The concerto is a passionate piece that shows the influence of Robert, Clara's husband-to-be, in its lyricism, rich orchestration, and virtuosic piano writing (and a cello solo in the slow movement!). The performance was solid and effective, with the alert orchestra and the soloist meeting the demands of the piece and producing a fitting degree of power when required.

The second half of the program, the Nowak edition of the Bruckner 7th, was given a fully committed performance especially showcasing strengths in the orchestra's brass and winds. Horns and Wagner tubas were exceptional. Maestro Baldini chose tempos quite close to the Gutmann markings, allowing the contrasts between lyricism and grace on the one hand, and great power on the other, to have much-needed effect. The opening theme in the cellos moved with real purpose, and finely nuanced tempo changes allowed for effective contrasts with the B and C themes in the exposition and throughout the movement. The coda was majestic. The slow movement opened at a sensible pace with warmly glowing contributions from the low brass. Again, Baldini effectively brought out contrasts among the sections of the movement, and the build-up to the great climax was well-handled, as were the consoling passages that led to its close. The scherzo had a power of its own, not over-emphasized, with the trumpets adding nicely to the color of the orchestral palette. It should be mentioned that Baldini is very attentive to the contributions of the various instrumental sections and expertly avoids any sensation of generalized "greyness" in the orchestra's sound. An upbeat finale capped off the hour-long performance very effectively. The large audience, the majority of whom had never heard a note of Bruckner's music before, responded enthusiastically. The Camellia Symphony provides a great service to this community and is to be commended for imaginative programming, effectively performed, that continues to attract a significant and dedicated following.

Neil Schore