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## Mondavi's lively acoustics help the Philharmonic outshine itself

By Patricia Beach Smith, Bee Arts Critic

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Any skeptics who heard the Sacramento Philharmonic Orchestra's thrilling debut concert at the Mondavi Center on Saturday surely should be able to set aside doubts about the legitimacy of this ensemble. Those who still hold onto the counterproductive view that this is not a "real" orchestra were not at this sold-out concert in David - or they simply want to live in the past.

In an era of tough sales, talk of dwindling audiences and old habits, being able to hang up the "Sold out!" sign would have been reason enough for the orchestra and management to crow before it even played a note. After Saturday's triumphant performances of Sergei

Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 - powerfully played by pianist Tian Ying; the orchestra's winning version of Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 2; and Darius Milhaud's charming "Le Boeuf sur le Toit" (the ox on the roof) there was sound evidence of the orchestra's professional and artistic mien. (That the orchestra only plays five concerts or so a year is sad, considering performances such as Saturday's are clearly possible, but financially out of reach.) Contributing to Saturday's success was a varied, listenable program, chosen and expertly conducted by the Philharmonic's music director, Michael Morgan.

The setting was an immense benefit. With lively acoustics, Jackson Hall provided the orchestra with a royal chance to be heard properly. Maybe the orchestra has sounded this great all along. It's hard to know. The Community Center Theater is no friend of unamplified sound.

The new hall on the University of California at Davis campus appears to energize performers, if the spring in Morgan's baton and the orchestra's responsiveness to it were examples. Morgan's all-out conducting, particularly of the Beethoven, sparked the orchestra to greatness. The disciplined classicism of this rather perfect composition provided Morgan and the orchestra with a favorite musical feast that they consumed with relish.

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*Michael Morgan is taking the Sacramento Philharmonic to new and thrilling heights*

Beethoven's easily assimilated, comfortable second symphony opens with bold, quick chords that require attention to the stick. The way the orchestra played those chords and all the myriad entrances and cutoffs in the other two pieces on the program indicated Morgan's obvious control of the ensemble throughout an evening of welcome contrasting dynamics, complex rhythms, moods and tempi.

The Beethoven was given a clean, precise, fitting performance, marked with sensitivity, elegance, and joy. It was a serious, intense contrast to the Milhaud work, which opened the program, with its flirty, if slightly tipsy, demeanor. The intoxicating little story of the slippery-footed ox on the roof is harder to play than it looks. The dissonances and melodies that tell the tale are a dizzying mix of jazz, Latin and Parisian themes that the orchestra played with aplomb and a sense of humor while maintaining good balance.

But the audience obviously liked the Rachmaninoff best. The monster concerto is a spectacular showpiece for pianists good enough to play it. Ying is one of them. His flashy fingering, energetic expressiveness and athletic ability showed genuine musical courage without much apparent ego. The first movement of the Rachmaninoff demanded Ying's full focus and power to play the furious bombastic sections, the maniacal octaves for sure hands and, in contrast, quiet attention to the sublime quieter areas.

The lush romanticism of the piece, while appealing, was held in check by both the soloist and the orchestra so it never became maudlin. The careful exposure of the various themes in the second movement took considerable concentration. The rolling thunder that is the last movement gave Ying more chances to shoot off pianistic pyrotechnics while the orchestra added much to the show with brass calls and percussion punctuations.

There was hardly a moment when the pianist was not hard at work in the final movement, carefully working in tandem with the orchestra to build the passionate crescendos of the stunning, abrupt ending. Ying's modest acceptance of three curtain calls belied his assertive keyboard acumen.

The orchestra's woodwinds continue to excel, the strings are much improved over last year, most of the brass playing is, well, sterling, and no one could quibble with the precise percussion section. While the concert as a whole deserved its raves, the acoustics in Jackson Hall made it impossible for anyone with a problem to hide. Intonation problems and accuracy still plague a few of the high strings and the French horn section, but continued improvement in these few areas should bring the orchestra and its conductor yet more acclaim.