

A Platonic relationship

From girl to young woman

Saturday, November 13

Westfield Symphony Orchestra, David Wroe (conductor), Sandra Wolf-Meei Cameron (violin). Dvorák: Serenade for Strings; Bernstein: Serenade after Plato's *Symposium*; Mozart: Symphony no. 38 ("Prague"). Presbyterian Church, Westfield.

By Robert W. Butts

Sometimes a concert is made memorable by the performance of one artist playing one particular work. Not too rarely the artist is a young, developing musician at the moment of realizing her or his potential. More rarely the work in question is a challenging mid-twentieth century composition. But such was very much the case when eighteen year old violinist Sandra Wolf-Meei Cameron and the Westfield Symphony Orchestra fully realize the power and breadth of Leonard Bernstein's *Serenade after Plato's 'Symposium'*.

First, there was the music itself. To those unfamiliar with Bernstein's masterpiece, it might seem less surprising to hear that he was the composer whose work was so well received. In fact, at dinner before the concert, I'd run into a couple of women who anticipated the evening would be successful and fun because they knew it featured a Bernstein work.

But the *Serenade* is about as far

removed from the composer's more popular Broadway language as can be imagined. The music is frequently beautifully lyrical, but pop-tinged it is not. Harmonies evolve and progress in complex fashion far more influenced by the language of Mahler, Bartók, and Hindemith than that of Gershwin or Porter. Rhythms frequently have a harsh bite. Even the jazzy syncopations have a distinct Stravinskian edge to them and are emphasized by the decent-sized percussion section. Larger-scale structure is tightly controlled with full awareness of the balances between emotional release and restraint, between sensual longing and fulfillment, and, most effectively, between solo line and orchestra texture.

Even the program notes, if inadvertently, helped bring recognition to the work's depth: Robert Aldridge nicely passed over the usual verbiage describing who the various philosophers at Plato's dinner table were and whereof they discoursed regarding physical and spiritual love. Any original programmatic associations were dispensed with in two sentences before discussing Bernstein's four-note motive and its expansion, transformation, and ultimate unifying functions. In this way, listeners were able to hear the violinist and the orchestra explore the music not as a tone poem, but as a fully developed five movement violin concerto as musically satisfying and compositionally solid as any of the era.

None of the *Serenade's* creative brilliance would have mattered, however,

had the actual performance not been so memorable. Ms. Cameron enthralled the audience with her totally involved interpretation. From the very first notes she was in full control and fully focused, thereby fully engaging both those in the audience and those playing with her on stage. Every note was treated with care as she displayed acute artistry and intelligence in her molding of phrases. Melodies, motives, and fragments revealed their expressive and structural significance at every turn. In key moments, she let her themes soar above the orchestra, sounding confident on their own with only silence surrounding her. At other times she blended perfectly with the larger ensemble.

As an aside, Cameron's growth as a performing artist was amazing compared to just a year ago. Gone were the constant rock-inspired gyrations and bobbing ponytail. Instead, her stage presence was totally in sync with her artistic interpretation, presenting herself as a highly talented young adult musician with something to say rather than as a child musician with a great deal of talent.

Cameron wasn't alone in successfully bringing the difficult work to life. The musicians of the Westfield Symphony Orchestra, led by David Wroe, soared with her, creating a rich orchestral fabric and an equally expressive interpretation. The passionately moving fourth movement — on hardly needs to know the designation as Agathon or who that might have been — provided a transforming

experience for all involved. Cameron's duet and trio playing with cellist Bruce Wang and violist Victoria Salas provided a deeply human sense of communication, warmth, and the shared experience of love and life translated through great music.