

# Hey, elk, look up

## Symphony, guest cellist bring great outdoors to Wharton concert

By LAWRENCE COSENTINO

For all the fiddlers, fandooglers and foam-boomers crowding the stage at Saturday's Lansing Symphony concert, two distinct figures linger in my mind. I'll start with the obvious one: Soloist Bion Tsang.

### Review

For better or worse, in motion or stasis, through reverie and hysteria, the evening's guest cellist made it impossible to take your eyes off of him.

Not that he was showing off. He seemed determined to take a seemingly cornball piece of music, Tchaikovsky's "Variations on a Roccoco Theme," and wring maximum meaning and drama from every bit. He was all business, ear cocked for every cue from the orchestra and maestro Timothy Muffitt.

Every note Tsang played was strong, clear and pure, from subsonic, Russian Orthodox basso tones to supersonic signals that must have made elk look up from the snowy earth in the trackless woods of Northern Lansing.

Tsang ignored the triviality of the opening bars as he began to work out vigorous, virtuosic variations on a neat little promenade theme. This "Roccoco" needed the run — it's not Tchaikovsky's finest hour. Between the first few variations, an inane woodwind outburst seems to chirp, "wasn't that nice." However, at about the fifth or sixth variation, Tsang jumped off the Good Ship Lollipop and dove deep, stretching time with soundings that unexpectedly reached to the bottom of a silent ocean. Now and then, he would suspend a note like a silver sphere in mid-air. The mid-January tubercular ward of an audience stopped coughing, and maybe even breathing, for what seemed like a very long time. The notes seemed to have no beginning and no end, no audible attack or decay. They were just there.

Suddenly, the cellist came back up for air with a flashy finale that came off as exhilarating, not silly, like gulping oxygen after a frightening encounter with an underrow. Tchaikovsky fools you every time. His depths are shallower than you think, but his shallows are often deeper.

It's worth a minute to give thanks that such guest artists have become a hallmark of the Muffitt era. Tsang joins a long string of totally engaged, audience-grabbing, brilliant soloists the Lansing Symphony has racked up in recent years. Condescending, self-important stuffed shirts and poodle-haired, pledge-week darlings are a thing of the long past.

The lead-up to Tchaikovsky was one of Haydn's more exquisitely wrought symphonies (No. 43), but unfortunately, Sat-

urday's performance was not so exquisite. A delicate miniature demands a super-fine brush, especially when the orchestra is stripped down to strings, two horns, an oboe and a bassoon. But the violins seemed to grab last year's brush from the back of the garage, with bristles going off in unnecessary directions. A bouncy minuet, invigorated by the tight stockings of 18th-century dance, helped the music come alive, but only for a few minutes. The rest of the time, a vinegary wheeze in the violins put the ear on edge. An overall deficit in the intensity and lean-forwardness needed to put this quiet music over undetermined Muffitt's noble effort to keep Haydn alive.

If cellist Bion Tsang was a man in motion Saturday, the night's other memorable figure was the opposite. For the first three movements of the night's closing work, Beethoven's "Pastoral Symphony (No. 6)," principal timpani player Andrew Spencer sat calmly behind his cauldrons of doom, observing the scene, playing nary a note.

All around him swirled a charmer of a performance, pure lightness and joy, at least before Spencer started to crease his tux. The first and third movements were irresistible sonic tableaux of mid-summer gaiety, especially welcome in early January. Twirling, avian solos by principal oboe Linda Binkley and her woodwind colleagues tripled the allure through all four movements.

As a youngster, I wished the lazy, languorous third movement would end and they'd get to the thunderstorm already, but that was when I was constantly buzzed on Count Chocula and circus peanuts. Now I know better. For one thing, I drink red wine with my circus peanuts. More to the point, I understand that this movement is about that perfect summer day you wish would never end. Muffitt and the orchestra let every breeze and buzzing bee drift by at its own unforced tempo. If any cares were left, the third movement's gentle peasant dance banished them.

But soft. At the end of the third movement, Spencer, after laying in wait for more than 35 minutes, sat up straight and picked up his sticks. The fine strands of hair in Wharton's Great Hall began to point to the ceiling (figuratively speaking). FA-BOOM! Thus began a marvel of extended musical onomatopoeia that still delights audiences down to their wet socks. All forces were inspired to drench the hall with a roiling panorama of sound. Double basses and cellos rumbled like the dogs of war, even after the storm lost its bite, but this was a benign battle.

Despite the deluge, the performance caught the lightness, exhilaration and pathos of Beethoven at his happiest. Saturday's picnic ought to hold us until the real thing comes along in May, this time with wasps.