

Tuesday, April 17, 2007

# Conductor Bisanti shines in U.S. debut

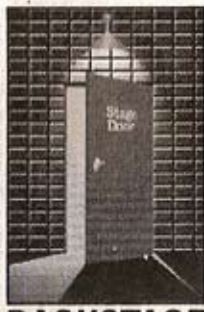
By **BARBARA ROSE SHULER**  
*Herald Correspondent*

**A**merica, good news! An exciting new conductor has just set foot on our continent, making his U.S. debut with the Monterey Symphony last weekend.

A prediction: Once discovered by orchestras and opera companies in this country, Italian maestro Giampaolo Bisanti will be as sought after here as he is in Europe.

Let's hope the relationship he recently forged with our own symphony remains strong so we can enjoy Bisanti's musical passion and mastery in future seasons.

In Carmel on Sunday afternoon, he bounded to the podium in long black tails for the Overture to Don Pasquale by Donizetti, which opened the program. This work begins with a short, single burst of full orchestral brightness that quickly shifts to a quieter mood articulated by solo cello, beautifully



long-distance runner.

Bisanti led the ensemble with theatrical power and flair, instinctively sculpting the sound of the orchestra to blend flawlessly with that of the piano, bringing the concerto to a magnificent finish.

Armstrong returned to the keyboard after intermission, taking his place as a member of the orchestra in the concluding work on the program, Richard Strauss' suite *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*.

This suite has an intriguing history. Strauss was commissioned in 1912 to compose incidental music for Moliere's play, "*Le bourgeois gentilhomme*." His librettist, Hugo van Hoffmannsthal, suggested expanding the score to include *Commedia dell'arte* themes and an opera — *Ariadne auf Naxos*. The project flopped. Later Strauss tried to turn the music from "*Le bourgeois gentilhomme*" into a ballet score, but that proved a failure as well.

Finally, he turned the work into the orchestral suite of

played by **ADRIANO KEARNS**.

Bisanti conveyed electricity and excitement so compelling in the brief seconds of the orchestral opening that the audience became instantly enthralled.

Born in 1972 into a musical family, Bisanti won a prestigious Italian singing contest at the age of 4 — yes, 4 — and set his intention to be a conductor at the age of 6. Radiating boundless energy and enthusiasm from the podium, he communicates with body language, his obvious musical authority and minute attention to score that there is nothing he would rather be doing than collaborating with an ensemble of musicians to make great music.

The program for this sixth concert cycle of the subscription season continues music director Max Bragado's *Season of Fives* theme with Camille Saint-Saën's *Piano Concerto No. 5* in F major, Op. 103 "*Egyptian*."

Young guest soloist Andrew Armstrong displayed stunning virtuosity and suppleness in this demanding three-movement work. He sustained dazzling technical control and expressiveness throughout a series of breathtaking runs up and down the keyboard, powerful crescendos and delicate lyrical passages.

Effortlessly, in one passage he made the piano imitate the sound of the Middle Eastern hammered instrument, the santur. Armstrong's sheer athletic prowess in this performance was impressive as well — a workout requiring the physical stamina of a

**BACKSTAGE  
PASS**

nine movements using a small orchestra scored for two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two

clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, two horns, one trumpet, one trombone, timpani, percussion, piano, harp, six first violins, four violas, four cellos and two double basses.

Although less satisfying in its grandness and musical lushness than the Saint Saens concerto, the Strauss suite emerged as a scintillating skein of descriptive pieces that admirably showcased the skills of the conductor and the players. Those familiar with Moliere's play could easily track the action in the score.

Captivating solo violin passages were delivered by Diane Nicholeris, a permanent member of the San Francisco Symphony and former concertmaster of the Monterey Symphony. Additional solo passages and intriguing conversations between instruments allowed the musicians a chamber-style medium in which to shine as individuals.

The symphony, under Bisanti's guidance, displayed delightful theatricality in all three works. Bisanti seems to tune to the individual voices of the instruments and sections as he would human voices in an opera, inviting their unique sounds to be fully present in the unfolding drama of the music. He's a dynamo, an audience-pleaser and a man who clearly serves the music above all.

How fine that he came to the Monterey Symphony to make his American debut.