

Entertainment & THE A

YIN, YANG AND I

Santa Barbara Symphony jump-starts its 2009-10 season with an international sensation

By **DANIEL KEPL**

NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

An animated crowd packed The Granada Saturday night to hear a special preseason concert by the Santa Barbara Symphony. Beethoven was the main subject of the musical feast, and the overture to "Coriolan" served as aperitif to the Second and Third piano concertos, a double entrée. Helmed by Music and Artistic Director Nir Kabaretti, the orchestra was in superb form. Soloist was the 27-year-old Chinese pianistic wonder Lang Lang.

Mr. Lang inspires dichotomies and conundrums in the classical music ether. Some think he's all spiked hair

and tight pants with little artistic substance, while others are blown away by his stunning technical prowess. Daniel Barenboim, a Lang mentor and no slouch at playing Beethoven, too, jokes that the young pianist has 11 fingers.

To this auditor's ear, Mr. Lang's playing is Yin-Yang incarnate; when his Yang is on, his playing is powerfully masculine, and the technical flourishes and huge sound can be a little unsettling. When his Yin surfaces, his playing is sublimely feminine, delicate and introspective, to the point of embarrassment — one almost has to look away, the revelations that intimate.

When Mr. Lang is in perfect balance, there is a musical convergence that

is breathtaking and deeply moving to behold. On Saturday, The Granada felt to be in perfect feng shui, a paradise of complementary forces and harmony.

Perhaps in homage to Mr. Lang's notorious shunning of traditional white tie and tailcoat, and conducting the entire program from memory, Mr. Kabaretti emerged in a svelte Nehru jacket to conduct "Coriolan," with an élan speaking to his confidence as the driving force of the Santa Barbara Symphony. The orchestra played with comfortable and comforting poise; ensemble balances seemed particularly focused and the dynamic contrasts the orchestra achieved were exhilarating.

An uproar greeted Mr. Lang as he entered to play the Second Piano Concerto, and the electricity between artist, orchestra and audience remained palpable to the last note of the concert.

The pianist's stunning technique in both concerti stamped the evening as special from the start, but it was in the slow movements of both that the pianist revealed his phenomenal skill and profound introspection.

Tone, articulation and phrasing in the outer movements of both concerti verified Mr. Lang's virtuosity, and his phenomenal technique enabled him to explore Beethoven's eccentricities. Transparency of statement and response, the judicious — and some might say odd — use of rubati revealed the sub-basements of Beethoven's thought and encouraged new interpretations of this repertoire.

The slow movements, however, transported The Granada to another world altogether — a journey into the subconscious ruminations of two geniuses. Mr. Lang lost himself and set aside his ego.

Affectation? Show-biz blarney? Hardly.

e-mail: life@newspress.com



DAVID BAZEMORE PHOTOS

Internationally celebrated pianist Lang Lang, with a hand from Santa Barbara Symphony conductor Nir Kabaretti, above right, played to a satisfied house at The Granada Saturday night.

NG LANG

