

Brilliant young pianist, stirring world premiere provide symphonic fireworks

By L. PIERCE CARSON, Register Staff Writer

The Napa Valley Symphony Orchestra joined the big leagues over the holiday weekend.

Teaming up with the internationally renowned Festival del Sole — which officially kicks off its third wine country season on Saturday — the local orchestra not only presented the world premiere of an important new work for orchestra, vocalists and choir but also the return engagement of surely the most exciting young pianist performing today.

Presented free of charge by festival producers as a gift to the community, the Fourth of July concert in Yountville's Lincoln Theater was staged as part of the town's traditional Independence Day festivities.

Although many came for the after-dark pyrotechnical display, holiday celebrants also found abundant fireworks on the Lincoln Theater stage.

Conrad Tao, a native of Urbana, Ill., and current Juilliard student, stunned a Festival del Sole audience last summer, substituting for an ailing soloist, with a dazzling interpretation of Prokofiev's third piano concerto, a work that's humbled many an artist. A cheering Festival del Sole throng couldn't believe it had heard such a mature rendition from a diminutive 13-year-old.

Tao did it again last Friday night — not only playing every note of George Gershwin's beloved "Rhapsody in Blue," but doing it in his own stylistic way. His "Rhapsody in Blue" was both poetic and imaginative. Maestro Asher Raboy accommodated the young pianist, underscoring the soloist's sophisticated nuances (which were simply amazing for one so young) and also allowing the polished ensemble enough freedom to deliver a sweeping interpretation that evoked memories of Paul Whiteman and Leonard Bernstein. And for some reason — closing my eyes and listening intently to Tao — I couldn't get Oscar Levant out of mind. Does anybody remember Oscar Levant — the brilliant pianist, composer and confidant of George Gershwin?

Raboy and company presented "Rhapsody in Blue" a few months back as part of Pink Martini's wine country debut. If that performance might be termed "night," then Friday night's offering would be "day." Here Tao and Raboy treated us to a reading that managed to bring together both symphonic and jazz elements of the work. By the time the big tune arrived, we were but putty in the artists' hands.

It was a dazzling performance. At intermission, I heard more than one audience member wish that Conrad Tao would make the Napa Valley an annual stop on his concert tour.

The evening's world premiere was a rousing bit of Americana, so appropriate for the nation's birthday. Although he's best known as acclaimed designer of some of the world's most prestigious golf courses (including Napa's Silverado Resort), Robert Trent Jones Jr. is also an accomplished poet. Composer Nolan Gasser set four of his poems to music, "American Festivals," a work that focuses on defining American holidays — Independence Day, Memorial Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Thanksgiving.

The four movements of the 65-minute work were set for full orchestra, chorus, narrator and a pair of soloists.

Joining the Napa Valley Symphony Orchestra for the premiere were mezzo-soprano Jill Grove, bass-baritone Eric Owens, popular Hollywood and TV actor Craig T. Nelson and the Festival del Sole Chorus, under the direction of Lynne Morrow.

The "Oration on July 4th" presented a musical discourse on liberty, while "Memorial Day" served as tribute to the country's fallen soldiers during a military funeral, complete with bagpipes. Incorporating lead lines for a tenor saxophone, "Black Suit Blues" embodied the poet's visceral memory of the civil rights movement and the assassination of Dr. King. "Thanksgiving," incorporating Native flute, focused on one of the country's most joyful holidays, evoking a variety of images and sentiments.

It's a stirring work, at times delivering the same impact found in the evocative quotations of Charles Ives. All hands did a fine job, with music director Raboy bringing it all together in a respectful, celebratory package.

Thanks to Festival del Sole, Napans had one more reason to celebrate America's birthday.