

JOHN NAUMAN

Piano

# A night of energy and acoustics in Redlands

► Pianist gives his best for Rachmaninov as Memorial Chapel offers a challenge

By Jean-Pierre Barricelli

Sergei Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Opus 18, is possibly the most romantically expansive work ever written for the piano. It sighs with nostalgia and argues with aggressiveness, and moodily covers the whole range in between. But, in all instances, it is expansive. And more than anything else, it is melodic.

Hence, we must presume, its enormous popularity. Even modern hit tunes have spawned from its melodic fabric, composed in 1900. In performance, it may not be treated with restraint, lest its very soul be stifled.

John Nauman, an accomplished young artist and a recent winner of four performance awards, including the 1989 Joanna Hodges competition in Palm Desert, starred in the concerto Saturday with the Redlands Symphony Orchestra.

Nauman played it with unquestionable dexterity and a good measure of fluid lyricism, winding up in dazzling fashion

---

## Music Review

---

with a wondrous display of agility. And as he sprang upward while releasing the final chord, the large audience rose to its feet in spontaneous applause.

Yet the performance, good as it was, needed more of that expansiveness. Its strength rarely reached the height of fire, and its melodic sweeps rarely reached down into true depths of feeling. Rachmaninov challenges the pianist to "let go" and still remain musical. Difficult to do. Nauman was on the threshold.

In all fairness to this brilliant artist, it must be noted that the abundant orchestra under Jon Robertson drowned him time and again. The Memorial Chapel smothers sounds easily as a result of dense acoustical bombardment. The Redlands Symphony is too large for it, and unless the conductor really reins his musicians, the piano is not heard, just as the violins fade under the brasses.

In fact, in loud passages, only the screech of the high strings survived Saturday evening, their tonal richness absorbed into the chapel's space.

This was audible in the opening number,

Carl Maria von Weber's Overture to "Euryanthe" (1823), and especially in Johannes Brahms' Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Opus 98 (1885).

Much of the orchestra's middle register struggled for existence. Robertson is a skilled interpreter of Romantic music, and he shapes it with exciting emotion. His tempos betray a strong passion and a commendable sense of the whole piece. For such music, of course, he needs a large constituency of instruments, and unfortunately the hall is not too friendly.

But if we recognize — and overlook — this reality, then we may appreciate how he approached Brahms' symphony: with forthright energy, determination and that often-discussed sense of struggle marking a passage from darkness to victory.

What is more effective than that last movement, in passacaglia form, whose variations suggest continuing search, and whose broad chorale and blaring assertions tell us much about discovery?