kendalia spencer

Butterfly Lovers Concerto Program Notes

The Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto is a widely known and loved Chinese composition that originated from the Chinese legend of the tragic romance between Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai that has been developed into an opera, concerti, and numerous films. My late grandmother told my mother how she went to the theater multiple times to watch the movie and cried each time in response to the heart-rending ending. My mother even remembers my grandmother humming the familiar melodies from the movie when she grew up. Unlike Western concerti, this concerto consists of one movement performed in seven sections, including melodies from Huangmei opera and traditional Chinese folk tunes. This clip only includes the third and fourth sections of the concerto with a rewritten ending.

In the first section, Zhu is introduced through a Chinese folk song, conveying her desire to go to school. However, she can only do so if she is disguised as a man. When traveling to school, she meets Liang, and they make an oath of fraternity. The second section represents Zhu and Liang's busy years at school. This contrasts with the third section where Zhu and Liang say their farewells. Here, Zhu invites Liang to come court her sister, but Liang does not realize that Zhu is inviting him to marry her. In the fourth section, Zhu returns home and realizes she has been promised to a son of a rich family. When Liang arrives at Zhu's home in the fifth section, he realizes Zhu is a woman and falls in love with her. These feelings of love transform into anger in the sixth section when Liang realizes Zhu's betrothment. The concerto comes to a close when Liang falls ill and passes away. On the day of her wedding, Zhu pays her respects at Liang's grave and is overcome with great anguish. Suddenly, Liang's grave opens, and Zhu throws herself into it to join him in death. However, death is not the end for them: Zhu's and Liang's spirits transform into a pair of butterflies, and they fly away together.