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Music review: Itzhak Perlman with the L.A. Phil at Hollywood Bowl

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A certain theory of orchestral hierarchy holds that when an orchestra is conducted by a notable and respected instrumentalist, the group performs in a different, particularly sympathetic way. It's as if the familial relations of instrumentalists warm up under such circumstances.

Whether or not this theory was holding true Tuesday night at the Hollywood Bowl, the Los Angeles Philharmonic gave an especially strong and integrated performance -- gave its all -- when indisputably respected and beloved violinist Itzhak Perlman seized the podium in conductor mode, for a stirring all-Beethoven evening.

As conductor, a role he has been taking on more of late, Perlman is seriously engaged and seemingly appreciative of the challenges away from his fiddle. He brushed aside audience attempts at applause when the recovered polio victim walked slowly on his crutches across the broad Bowl stage to the podium. This was serious business, not show business.

Though this was not a night about showcasing Perlman as violin virtuoso, he opened the program on a tender note by soloing on Beethoven's Romances Nos. 1 and 2, with his innately singing phrasing and suppleness of tone intact.

No doubt the appearance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, that "greatest hit" in the composer's canon, upped the wattage of public appeal and drew an impressive 12,000-plus audience to the Bowl despite the steamy temperatures. And not surprisingly, Perlman and the Phil managed to apply fresh polish and depth to the old favorite, with gusto and lucid detail.

All this was achieved despite the Bowl's innate limitations, including canned sound, a stowaway cricket chorus (extra exuberant on this sweltering late summer night) and smatterings of the dread between-movement applause, which Perlman endured on the grin-and-bear-it plan.

In a way, though, greater intrigue came through the too rarely played Eighth Symphony, with its quirky and post-classical twists, lack of angst or an adagio, and, well, summery spirit. Perlman, with orchestra in tow, beautifully embraced the score's humor and musical elasticity.

From a circuitous local angle, in the triumphal passages of the Fifth's final movement at evening's end, we could easily detect the influence of a particular harmonic/melodic motion on the movie music of John Williams (recently heard on this stage) and the scores of film composers in his wake. What happens at the Hollywood Bowl can have reverberations in other corners of Hollywood.

In all, it was a hot night at the Bowl, on multiple fronts.

-- Josef Woodard

Photo: Itzhak Perlman conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl. Credit: Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times