

FEATURES

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2008

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NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Beyoncé Knowles is a double threat this holiday season, with a new album, 'I Am ... Sasha Fierce,' which is being released tomorrow — and a starring role in 'Cadillac Records,' a new film set to open early next month

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, AP AND AFP

[THE WEEKENDER]

No fiddling around with Wieniawski

Violinist Benjamin Schmid amazed as the soloist in the NSO's performance of Wieniawski's Second Violin Concerto

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

At Friday night's concert in Taipei's National Concert Hall the Austrian violinist Benjamin Schmid showed his understanding of the less-than-bravura role required of the soloist by Wieniawski's Second Violin Concerto of 1862.

Most 19th-century Romantic-era concertos provided occasions when a soloist, deemed to represent some passionate force, lined up against an orchestra seen as standing for altogether more ordinary things. The preferred solo instrument was always the piano or the violin — cellos, clarinets and flutes weren't considered capable of anything like such heroic possibilities, though Dvorak was to change that with what he came up with for the cello.

Wieniawski's work isn't shaped in this mould at all, though. The Polish virtuoso only wanted to pen something to display his own performing talents, as Mozart had done before him, and his best-known concerto isn't an old warhorse like Beethoven's or Tchaikovsky's, but something more delicate, albeit intricate as well. It even could be argued to be better suited to listening to on headphones while working at the computer than heard in a large modern concert hall.

Schmid embodied this dedicated but unheroic role to perfection, and his solo encore was listened to with quiet attentiveness by the National Symphony Orchestra's talented instrumentalists.

Mendelssohn is the Robert Louis Stevenson of classical music, though without ever having imagined a Mr Hyde. His symphonies, too, are "light," and his Scottish Symphony that followed required no great change of gear. He was the well-mannered perfectionist. He wrote oratorios — religious declamations in key with mid 19th-century bourgeois sentiment — but no great shakes for most listeners these days. They could never do anything like predict or explain, let alone console for (but what could?) something like the looming First World War.

And the case against Mendelssohn can sometimes feel overwhelming. His works have tunes — but so what? They don't combine towards some overwhelming question, as Beethoven's insistently aspire to do. In place of weight he offers grace, and Friday's rendering under Adrian Leaper didn't so much stop the soul as entertain the wistful imagination (as Mendelssohn's contemporaries would have put it).

Leaper actually proved a good guide here — if you watched him you saw a little into the interior of this elusive music, unadorned music. It isn't the stuff that allows conductors to display flamboyant charisma, but it repays their care and attention, and this Leaper certainly gave it.



Right: Austrian violinist Benjamin Schmid. Below: The NSO rehearses with Schmid.



Pop music's 'dreamgirl' awakens

In the new film *Cadillac Records*, which tells the story of the pioneering Chicago blues label Chess Records, Beyoncé Knowles makes a memorable entrance. Playing the singer Etta James, Knowles is introduced to the label's co-founder Leonard Chess (Adrien Brody) in a hotel room, where she sprawls across the bed and snaps, "Don't be looking at me like I ain't wearing no drawers." She then curses at everyone and everything in sight before hiding in the bathroom, where she unleashes the voice that resulted in a long string of classic R'n'B hits for James.

It's startling to see Knowles — one of the few pop stars left with a wholesome, good-girl image — swaggering and swearing through her performance. But her mother, Tina, who vets all the scripts that are submitted to her, flagged this one as a keeper, noting that the hard-living, emotionally scarred James could be the role of a lifetime.

In an interview on the top floor of a hotel on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Knowles said that when she read the script: "I said, 'I have to do this movie,' but I was terrified. Was I really ready?"

Knowles' most significant previous role was in 2006's *Dreamgirls*, for which she earned a Golden Globe nomination. Even so, her study of the life of James and her work on the film not only resulted in new dramatic range, it also altered the direction of her new album, *I Am ... Sasha Fierce*, which is being released tomorrow on Music World/Columbia Records.

There was certainly no guarantee that a woman who appeared on the cover of a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue could be convincing as the heroin-addicted daughter of a prostitute, whose powerhouse sound

conveyed a lifetime of heartbreak and defiance in songs like *At Last* and *Tell Mama*, incorporating a blues attitude into a wide range of pop genres.

"I was surprised at how much Beyoncé threw the glamour out the window so easily and so joyfully, and embraced the unattractiveness of being strung out," said Darnell Martin, the writer and director of the film, which is to open in the US on Dec. 5. Though the role was written with Knowles in mind, Martin said she was impressed by how far she pushed herself, physically and emotionally, into the darkest parts of James' life. "She was really excited about getting that raw," Martin said. "She really wanted to dig in and get real."

The climax of *Cadillac Records* — with a disheveled Etta James saved from an overdose by Leonard Chess in her empty, ghostly house — makes for an impressive contrast with the Beyoncé who strode quickly through the hotel room's door, talking quickly and smiling broadly.

On the day after the presidential election she was decked out in an "Obama-inspired" outfit — a navy blue double-breasted suit and a red-white-and-blue-striped tie. Knowles, 27, was supposed to be in Japan doing publicity for the new album, but she cut her trip short to be in New York to watch the returns with friends at home; she decorated her apartment with balloons and flags for the occasion.

"I fell asleep literally with tears in my eyes, crying and smiling at the same time," she said, seated cross-legged on a couch. "I almost feel guilty talking about the record, because there's more important things going on."

The album marks an ambitious step for the Houston-born Knowles, who — as a

solo artist (using only her first name) and as a member of the trio Destiny's Child — has sold more than 75 million albums worldwide. It's a double-disc set: One CD, *I Am*, is a ballad-heavy set of relatively spare, introspective songs; the second disc, *Sasha Fierce*, takes its name from her onstage alter ego and shifts focus to more up-tempo dance tracks. (Continuing an annoying industry trend, the album is being released simultaneously in a "standard version," with 11 songs, and a "deluxe version," containing 18 songs.)

In the middle of recording, Knowles signed on for *Cadillac Records*. To research James' addiction, she spent some time with women staying in a Phoenix House facility in Brooklyn. She had only six days on set in New Jersey to shoot her scenes, so she began rehearsing with Brody before the filming.

"I didn't anticipate her being as emotionally present and connected with the role as she was," Brody said. "She had her game on track. I think this meant a lot to her."

Knowles said that Martin and the other actors made her feel secure enough to delve into James' demons, allowing her to elevate her work beyond her own expectations. "For the first time, I was able to feel that out-of-body experience in a movie that I feel onstage," she said. She put on weight — 6.8kg — to match James' size and added a rougher physicality to her movements; she sings two songs associated with James with confidence and authority.

Cadillac Records takes its share of liberties with the chronology and the details of the Chess era — essentially writing Phil Chess, Leonard's brother and partner, out of the story — but strong performances (with Jeffrey Wright's stoic Muddy Waters at the center) capture the label's innovations and its legacy. As she

learned the history of Chess Records — which added amplification and urban sophistication to the Delta blues on recordings by giants like Waters and Howlin' Wolf, and helped to usher in the rock 'n' roll era with artists including Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley — Knowles said she felt an extra obligation to the project as a musician.

"I realized what an important story it was, especially for my generation," she said. "We don't know where rock 'n' roll came from, we don't know that the Beatles and the Rolling Stones got their inspiration from people like Muddy Waters and Little Walter."

Knowles didn't speak with James — who, at 70, is still touring — until after the film was completed. "She's just the same, she's honest and no-nonsense," Knowles said. "And I know that in some interviews she was like, 'I don't know if she can play me.' But when I met her, she said, 'You are a bad girl, and I know that's the ultimate compliment from her.'"

Things move at perpetually high speed with Knowles; hours after this interview, she was on a plane to London for the MTV Europe Music Awards. Next year, after the album's marketing campaign is finished, she has a 110-date tour planned, including a week in Las Vegas; a Spanish-language version of the new album; and the release of her first nonsinging role in a movie, the thriller *Obsessed*. Then there's her continuing work with her fashion line, House of Dereon, and high-profile endorsements with companies like L'Oréal and Pepsi.

Knowles acknowledged that her husband since April, the rapper and label executive Jay-Z, has been an influence on her growing multimedia empire. "He's brilliant, and I'm very proud of him, and I've learned so much from him," she said. "But even before I met Jay, I've always been in control of my career."

PLANET POP

ON a night when the theme of change and cultural fusion echoed in lyrics, performances and acceptance speeches, Colombian rocker **Juanes** who's become a voice for social issues walked away as king of the Latin Grammys.

At Thursday's Houston debut of the ceremony, the 36-year-old singer-songwriter from Medellín who started a foundation to help land-mine victims, swept awards in all five categories for which he was nominated, including record of the year and album of the year and album of the year.

He also set a new record for total wins, bringing his total Latin Grammy trophies to 17.

"I can't believe it. I am very, very happy, very grateful to life, to

Angelina Jolie wants to "fade away" from acting to spend more time with her growing family. PHOTO: AP

music, to God, to the Academy," Juanes said after the awards, noting that he had trouble containing his amazement while accepting the awards.

Hollywood mermaid **Daryl Hannah** will be on board a militant conservationist group's ship for a looming confrontation with Japan's whalers in the Antarctic, the captain said last week.

"Daryl is joining our group," Sea Shepherd captain Paul Watson said. "She'll be on board — she's joining us at the end of the month."

Hannah, blonde star of **Ron Howard's** 1984 mermaid fantasy *Splash* and more recently featured in **Quentin Tarantino's** *Kill Bill* movies, will be on the Sea Shepherd's flagship the *Steve Irwin* for its annual joust with the whalers.

The ship was named after the Australian environmentalist and television "crocodile hunter" killed by a stingray in 2006.

While Hannah has been busy preparing to save the whales, fellow Hollywood luminary **Lindsay Lohan** has raised a few eyebrows after referring to President-elect **Barack Obama** as the country's "first colored president," using the outdated and derogatory term in a TV interview.

Describing her experience on Election Day on the show *Access Hollywood*, Lohan said: "It was really exciting. It's an amazing feeling. It's our first colored president."

Interviewer Maria Menounos didn't question the 22-year-old actress on her

use of the term, which dates back to the period when blacks were legally discriminated against. *Access Hollywood* also didn't cite her remark in its online story, but did post an "extended interview" video on its Web site that included the remark. A spokesman for the syndicated entertainment news program said in a statement on Wednesday: "We believe the word in question that Ms Lohan used was unintelligible."

Moving from "foot in mouth" to "foot in someone else's mouth"; Rapper **Kanye West** was arrested on Friday after a fracas outside a nightclub.

The 31-year-old star was detained early Friday after an incident involving a photographer outside the Tup Tup Palace bar in Newcastle, northern England, but was later released without charge.

On the other side of the Atlantic, things are also looking up for **Britney Spears**. Last year the troubled star was taking court-ordered drug and alcohol tests, had fired her managers, was losing custody of her

Columbian rocker Juanes won a record 17 Latin Grammys. PHOTO: EPA

kids, and some journalists were preparing her obituary. This week, she was caring for her children like any mother would when she rushed 2-year-old Jayden James to a hospital after

a bad reaction to something he ate. As for her career, only one week ago she was on stage performing with **Madonna** and on the brink of an

extraordinary musical comeback.

Last-minute show cancellations may be a thing of the recent past for Britney, but sadly not so for R'n'B singer **Rihanna**. The globe-trotting diva canceled a sold-out concert in the Indonesian capital Jakarta on Friday because of security concerns, event organizers said. Indonesia has been on alert in case of reprisals after three Islamist militants were executed early this week for their parts in the 2002 Bali nightclub bombings that killed 202 people.

With six kids to watch over, *Changing* star **Angelina Jolie** told the BBC she plans to fade away from acting to spend more time raising her family, but she stopped short of pledging to quit her craft for good. "I don't plan to keep acting very long, I'm ready to do a few things now and fade away and get ready to be a grandma one day," Jolie told the British broadcaster in an interview posted on the BBC Web site on Thursday.

In other news, a southern California dental assistant who admitted to stalking *Miss Congeniality* actress **Sandra Bullock** has been placed on three years' probation. Marcia Valentine, 47, was arrested in April of last year after police said she tried to run down Bullock's husband, motorcycle mogul **Jesse James**, outside the couple's home in Sunset Beach.