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Review: Leslie B. Dunner delivers challenging, magnetic performance

Guest conductor and music director candidate sets the bar extremely high for Boise Philharmonic's 2007-2008 season.

The Boise Philharmonic 2007-2008 season opened like an explosion, from the stately flourish of Haydn to the fiery edge of a turbulent tryout, both wrapped around the rock-star-like performance by piano soloist Alpin Hong.

Guest conductor Leslie B. Dunner's program can only be considered a runaway hit.

The philharmonic is now in the second season of a search for a new musical director. This concert marked Dunner's return. He was the first conductor to step in after musical director James Ogle suffered a minor stroke in 2005. Dunner wowed 'em then, and did the same Saturday night at the orchestra's performance at the Morrison Center.

The program was ranging, energetic and satisfying. Dunner conducted the musicians with a sure hand and a warm magnetism that charmed the audience and the musicians.

In his pre-concert interview, he said he deliberately created challenges for the musicians by programming contrasting styles, works with tricky rhythms, and difficult entrances and exits, all to be learned in a one-week rehearsal period.

All of Dunner's challenges proved true, with three disparate pieces that shared common elements: they all heavily featured solos by orchestra musicians, a seeming cacophony that suddenly united in rapturous unity.

For the audience Saturday night, that challenge became more intense with the absence of concertmaster Geoffrey Trabichoff.

Trabichoff was in a car accident returning home from Friday night's concert in Nampa. He was not seriously injured but was unable to play Saturday, so associate concertmaster Jill Rowley stepped into his role, handling several violin solos in the Haydn.

The first piece started with a small, Baroque-size orchestra and the gentle solo notes of Franz Joseph Haydn's Symphony No. 6, "Le Matin." The piece is nicknamed "The Morning," because the opening comes on like a sunrise. This early Haydn symphony celebrates the Baroque, yet also hints at what's to come, both in musical history and in this concert. Solo lines soared then crashed together in a slightly abstract take on the style.

The orchestra executed each turn of the piece and solo expression of horn, wind and string with precision. The solos by Rowley and principal flutist Jessica Warren were beautifully played.

Warren is one of several new players to join the philharmonic for this season. This concert also became a debut for principal clarinetist Erin Voellinger of Denver, associate principal trumpeter Matthew Kirkpatrick of Nashville, violist Henry Olvera, a Boise State student, and violinist Michaela Pape, a student from Albertson College of Idaho.

The orchestra's ranks swelled for Maurice Ravel's Concerto in G Minor for Piano and Orchestra, with Alpin Hong on piano. Tall, lithe and elegant, Hong attacked the piece with a rare and assured hand.

From the crisp clap that kicks off the concerto, Hong, Dunner and the orchestra highlighted the connection between soloist and orchestra, with the piano often underscoring and complimenting the strings and wind instruments at one moment, then thundering over them the next. The piece beautifully juxtaposed a classical sensibility with a jazz intension.

Hong was especially brilliant on the melodious second movement, making it sound almost liquid. Then he attacked the third with flair and verve. The entire piece was breathtakingly exciting.

After a standing ovation and three curtain calls, Hong returned to perform Sonata for Left Hand Alone by Alexander Scriabin. The piece was composed for pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who lost his right hand during World War I.

It was a true tour-de-force in which Hong showed his talent and his showmanship.

Afterward, Hong entered the lobby at intermission surrounded by his fiancée and friends, to greet his new fans and sign autographs. Hong has a clear opportunity to do for the classical piano what Yo-Yo Ma did for the cello: make it hip. When does he record with U2?

Dunner's finale was a highly dramatic selection of suites from Sergei Prokofiev's ballet score for "Romeo and Juliet."

Dunner created an intriguing piece by choosing the decidedly unsentimental, powerfully Russian segments from the ballet, opening with "Morning Dances," probably the ballet's most well-known theme.

That set the tone for dynamic power that continued to the final notes of "Tybalt's Death."

The orchestra's sound was strong, resonate and rich, enhanced by the addition of alto saxophone (an unusual instrumentation for orchestra) played by Rodney Zurovestra. The five selections Dunner chose created a rather fractious whole. But the bombastic, turbulent arc it created echoed the first two pieces, giving this seemingly divergent program a beautiful through line.

The bar is now set high with this remarkable start to what promises to be the most interesting philharmonic season yet.

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