

Symphony, subtitled *Divine Poem*, by Alexander Scriabin.

With only Rimsky-Korsakov's five-minute Introduction to Mussorgsky's unfinished opera *Khovantchina* and Tchaikovsky's 18-minute *Variations on a Rocooco Theme* to preface it, the emphasis was clearly being placed on Scriabin's most gargantuan work (50 minutes, in its stocking feet).

Perhaps that's why the extraordinarily gifted and accomplished Montreal guest-conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin, 31, chose it. This was only his second main-concert appearance with the TSO, and doubtless he wanted to make a big impression in a seldom-performed work which required him to be centre stage and pumping energy for every second of its strife-filled course.

Certainly that was the impression he gave. Nézet-Séguin patently knew Scriabin's millions of notes fully and intimately, and, with his unceasingly busy body, hands and arms, placed every one of those notes exactly where he wanted it; a tremendous feat, achieved without faltering. The Vesuvian energy and total command of his reading were phenomenal. (The program was repeated on Thursday.)

But then, there was the work itself: That cosmically ambitious yet strangely mundane monolith (the three movements linked into one) which, I grant, has its devotees but which seems to me pushy, bombastic, turgid, not nearly interesting enough for the almost unremitting noise it makes, and quite far short of anything suggesting the divinity its subtitle claims. Even the relatively lyrical middle section, with its conventional twittering of birds, soon gets fraught again, pushing the envelope of Wagnerian chromaticism less expertly than Strauss and less persuasively than Franck, and ends up bellowing again anyway.

I found myself wishing ardently that if Nézet-Séguin had wanted to make a big splash with a seldom-done Russian blockbuster, he'd chosen that lovely masterpiece of Prokofiev's last years, the *Cello Symphony*, which also would have given Shauna Rolston, his cello soloist, something worthy of her considerable mettle -- though perhaps not with the carbon-fibre cello she used in the Tchaikovsky.

With the Tchaikovsky thus spectacularly replaced by the Prokofiev, Nézet-Séguin then could have wowed us personally with, say, the same composer's concert excerpts from his ballet *Romeo and Juliet* or Stravinsky's *Petrushka* or even Shchedrin's *Carmen Suite*, all of them incontrovertibly Russian, none of them all that frequently played, all of them more toothsome than the Scriabin, and all full of opportunities for high conductorial display.

As it was, we had the unbridled thrust of the Scriabin, led up to by the sensitive morsel of Rimsky-Korsakov-Mussorgsky and the slight Tchaikovsky staple, exquisitely in tune from cellist Rolston and brilliant in its bravura passages, though, I thought, burdened with a bit more melodrama than those passages could carry.

One came away wanting to hear both Nézet-Séguin and Rolston again very soon but, if possible, in something other than moot Mussorgsky, minor Tchaikovsky and megalomaniac Scriabin.

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