



New Jersey Symphony Orchestra ignites Winter Festival with 'Hero's Fire'

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By **Ross Amico/For The Times of Trenton**

As we move in earnest into the winter season, music lovers will have an opportunity to warm themselves, as the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra presents an incendiary program built around a unifying motif of "The Hero's Fire."

Music Director Jacques Lacombe will lead the ensemble in a program both atmospheric and opulent.

Richard Wagner's "Die Walküre" ("The Valkyrie"), the second of the music dramas that make up his four-part cycle, "The Ring of the Nibelung," opens literally in the midst of a raging winter storm.

By the opera's end, however, the element of fire dominates, as Wotan, king of the gods, bids his daughter Brünnhilde (the title character) farewell. He strips her of her immortality and places her into an enchanted sleep. She slumbers on a remote mountaintop, in a protective ring of fire that only the most valiant of heroes will cross.

It's one of the emotional high points of "The Ring" — a father reluctantly enforcing his duties as ruler — especially poignant in that he is forced to punish his favorite daughter for taking it upon herself to carry out his own secret desire to protect his mortal son.



Pianist Yevgeny Subdin will be the featured soloist in the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra's performance of Alexander Scriabin's "Prometheus," part of its program "The Hero's Fire" tomorrow night at New Brunswick's State Theatre.

It's a moment that puts a very human face on mythological tragedy. The music underlines the pathos of the situation, while at the same time giving full measure to the spectacle, as Wotan strikes his spear on rock and the stage is engulfed in smoke and flame.

From the Nordic and Teutonic myths of "The Ring," the NJSO will shift its focus to a heady mix of Impressionism and Russian folklore, in Igor Stravinsky's "The Firebird."

"The Firebird" was Stravinsky's breakthrough ballet. Commissioned by famed impresario Serge Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes, its scenario blends the fairy story of Kashchei the Deathless with the lore of the previously unrelated mythological bird.

The hero, Prince Ivan, encounters all sorts of magical objects and creatures while wandering in Kashchei's realm. He discovers 13 princesses, and he falls in love with one of them.

His negotiations with Kashchei quickly turn sour. It is the Firebird who protects Ivan, enchants the sorcerer and his minions, and provides the secret of their destruction. The ballet ends in a blaze of glory, with a brilliant fanfare that heralds the kind of unexpected rhythmical emphases of Stravinsky-yet-to-come.

Another Russian provides the centerpiece of the NJSO program. Alexander Scriabin was one of classical music's great eccentrics. A classmate of Sergei Rachmaninoff and a formidable composer for the piano himself, Scriabin embarked on a series of bold orchestral canvases, which seethe ecstasy and fairly drip lava. In fact, his most famous work is called "The Poem of Ecstasy."

Over the course of his development as an artist, he moved from an early love of Chopin, through a pantheistic phase, into Nietzsche and theosophy, resulting in a series of late, great manifestations of megalomania. Mysticism and atonality hang like a cloud of frankincense about his later works.

He spent his last years planning "Mysterium," a monumental synthesis of the arts, which was to have been enacted in the foothills of the Himalayas. The piece was to have spanned seven days, at the end of which the world as we know it would come to an end, mankind replaced by a race of nobler beings, the earth transformed by bliss, and Scriabin himself revealed as Messiah.

To this end, he composed for such practical means as bells suspended by ribbons from clouds.

"Mysterium" was to have been the ultimate synesthetic experience. Scriabin, like a number of other well-known composers (Liszt, Rimsky-Korsakov, Olivier Messiaen), experienced music in terms not only of sound but also color.

His "Prometheus," written around the same time as "The Firebird," actually calls for a "color organ." However, what Scriabin's intentions were, exactly, remains unclear. In some performances, the colors are projected on a screen. There are those who claim this is a compromise, and that the hall itself should be flooded with color.

The color choices themselves are based on the "circle of fifths" (closely-related pitches or key tonalities), rather than reflecting a genuine synesthetic response.

Lighting for the NJSO performances will be by Arc3design. Pianist Yevgeny Subdin will appear as piano soloist.

Prometheus, of course, was the titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind, only to pay dearly for the transgression. He was chained to a rock, his regenerating liver torn out by an eagle day after day. Romantic artists loved to read Prometheus as a metaphor for themselves.

A lifelong hypochondriac, Scriabin died of septicaemia from an infected carbuncle (the result of a shaving accident). He was 43 years-old. At the time of his death, "Mysterium" was left incomplete.

The program is the first of Orchestra's 2012 Winter Festival. A panel discussion will be held on the topic of alternative energy sources, one hour before performances today and Sunday. Also, artisans who work with fire and environmental organizations will host displays at an Information Fair and Artisan Marketplace.

Upcoming weeks will bring concerts titled "Best of Playing with Fire" (Jan. 13, 14 and 15), a program built on diablerie, including works by Offenbach, Weber, Gounod, Berlioz and François Dompierre; and "Fire: Light and Legend" (Jan. 20, 21 and 22), with music by Haydn, Beethoven and Kaija Saariaho.

Saariaho, one of Finland's most prominent composers, will actually be on hand on Jan. 21 to discuss her work. There will also be a lecture on the mythological Prometheus (Jan. 20 and 22) and a panel discussion on "The Heroism of Fire in Nature" (Jan. 14 and 15).

"The Hero's Fire"

New Jersey Symphony Orchestra

Opening of Winter Festival; works by Wagner, Scriabin and Stravinsky

When: 8 p.m. tomorrow

Where: State Theatre, 15 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick

Admission: \$20-\$85; (800) 255-3476 or njsymphony.org

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