

The Moscow Times • com



The Moscow Times » Issue 4168 » Top Stories

Orchestra Fest Hits Season High Point

17 June 2009

[By Raymond Stults / Special to The Moscow Times](#)

Despite a crisis-related reduction in its budget, this year's annual Festival of Symphony Orchestras of the World, which ended last Friday, proved to be the best of the four that have taken place to date. And judging by what was heard from four of the five orchestras that appeared, this year's festival must almost certainly be reckoned the high point of the current Moscow orchestral season in terms of both playing and programming.

Following a pair of concerts by France's Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse, which I unfortunately missed, the festival stage at the Hall of Columns of the House of Unions was taken over by Hungary's Budapest Festival Orchestra under the baton of its co-founder and artistic director, Ivan Fischer. It required only a few measures of the opening "American Suite" of Antonin Dvorak to make clear that this was an orchestra of truly exceptional quality. And so it proved throughout the evening. Superbly balanced string sections, finely tuned woodwinds and full-throated but never raucous brass joined together to create a beautifully integrated whole in what seemed to be complete rapport with the intentions of their conductor.

The opening work, which despite its title sounded every bit as Czech in origin as the rest of Dvorak's music, was followed by zestfully played suites of Hungarian and Romanian folk dances compiled and orchestrated by two of Hungary's greatest 20th-century composers, Zoltan Kodaly and Bela Bartok. Saving the best for last, the orchestra then turned to Dvorak's Symphony No. 7. Though its key signature is D minor, the symphony seems essentially a festive work, full of broad, sweeping melodies that linger in the mind long after the playing comes to an end. Fischer and the orchestra gave it a truly magnificent performance.

Small wonder, then, that the Budapest Festival Orchestra made it to the top 10 among the world's 20 best orchestras in a recently published rating by a panel of eminent music critics.

Next to be heard was the Symphony Orchestra of West German Radio, from Cologne, under the baton of its chief conductor, Soviet-born Semyon Bychkov. If not in the same league as the guests from Hungary, the orchestra displayed solid musical virtues, first with an eloquent reading of Robert Schumann's Symphony No. 2 and then pulling out all the stops with a truly virtuoso performance of the varied array of tone paintings that make up Richard Strauss' massive "Alpine" Symphony.

The appearance of visitors from the western Siberian metropolis of Omsk brought with it a number of happy surprises. First of all, as led by its young chief conductor, Dmitry Vasilyev, the Omsk Symphony Orchestra played to a higher standard than that heard most of the time from a majority of Moscow's own orchestras. And then, in addition to familiar music by Pyotr



Festival Of Symphony Orchestras Of The World

Ivan Fischer, co-founder and artistic director of Hungary's Budapest Festival Orchestra, conducting at the festival.

Tchaikovsky and Modest Mussorgsky, the Omsk players brought along and gave a resounding performance to a scintillating piece of music from the present century. Written by Omsk-born Israeli composer Ilya Heifets and titled "Jaffa" Symphony, the work paints a musical picture of life in the city near Tel Aviv, where Heifets was long a resident, combining tunes of its Jewish and Arab population in an often dissonant but constantly exhilarating manner.

The roar of approval that greeted the conclusion of Heifets' symphony was as much a surprise as the quality of the music itself, considering the rather conservative nature of the festival's audience, which seemed in large part to be made up this year, as in the past, of strangers to the concert hall -- in particular, government employees invited to attend by the presidential administration, which acts as the festival's financial sponsor.

The festival closed on Russia Day with music by one of Russia's most innovative composers, Alexander Scriabin, as played by Moscow's own Russian National Orchestra. The first half of the program brought Scriabin's rarely heard Symphony No. 1, an early work with echoes of Richard Wagner that seems rather tame when compared to the composer's later works. Nevertheless, it contains many moments of great beauty and imagination. The orchestra, under the baton of its founder and artistic director, Mikhail Pletnev, played to its accustomed exemplary standard and was joined by a superb chorus and pair of soloists in the symphony's lovely concluding movement.

Young Mariinsky Theater house conductor Mikhail Tatarnikov took over the podium for the concert's second half, leading Scriabin's "Prometheus (Poem of Fire)," a work composed 10 years after the symphony and far from tame. Scriabin's score specifies that a light show of designated brilliant colors should flood the hall during the work's performance. The festival made a stab at following those instructions, but the results proved disappointing, perhaps because of the architectural features of the Hall of Columns or perhaps simply from a lack of imagination. Tatarnikov did what seemed an excellent job of holding together Scriabin's gigantic musical structure.

[BATONS for Conductors](#)

A great gift for a music Director Conductor
Batons by Premier Batons



[Opera and ballet shows](#)

Moscow Russia 2009 Season Buy tickets to
all performances

Ads by Google

© Copyright 2007. The Moscow Times. All rights reserved.