

Oh those Russians: Rousing finale for SSO

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There were two mad Russian composers on the TCU Place stage Saturday night, musically speaking. One was insane, the other almost insanely angry; both wrote music to rouse the senses, and rousing it was at the hands of the Saskatoon Symphony Orchestra (SSO).

Alexander Scriabin and Dmitri Shostakovich contributed to an often-boisterous season finale for the SSO Saturday evening. It was a concert of colossal sound but also fine delicacy, as the SSO musicians threw themselves into three great works.

The first was Carl Maria von Weber's overture to *Der Freischutz*, an opera that profoundly influenced the composers of the romantic period -- particularly Richard Wagner.

Der Freischutz makes big statements, ominous and joyful by turns, with the cellos sharing in much of the drama. If overtures encapsulate what is to come, you'd be convinced to see the opera, so beautiful is this work.

The evening then was taken over by the Russians and their interpreters. Special guest pianist Dianne Werner learned Scriabin's Concerto in F sharp minor very recently -- she was unfamiliar with the piece before last year -- but played it as if it has always been part of her repertoire.

Seldom heard, the Scriabin is a gorgeous romantic work that deserves more play. Scriabin may have been insane, an egoist on drugs, but he wrote beautiful melodies that were perfectly evoked by Werner's outstanding play.

While the piano's part in this concerto has some flash -- arpeggios and a few big chords -- much of it is close-handed melodic interplay. Scriabin sometimes places both hands deep in the bass, or high in the treble notes. Werner's smooth performance somehow melded the delicacy needed in the melody with the power required for the more aggressive phases. She truly has remarkable touch and interpretation.

Werner is a well-known Canadian pianist who teaches at the Glenn Gould Studio at the Royal Conservatory. Elegantly dressed in a black gown, with a jewel-like encrusted bodice, she was the epitome of talent and classic presentation.

Shostakovich, who spent much of his life in a fury against Stalin, infiltrated the SSO for the second half of the performance. His anger was justified; Stalin was determined to make Shostakovich's life horrible, and succeeded.

The furies of the 20th century blew like a hot wind across the stage. The musicians were clearly engaged in this extraordinary -- if exceptionally long -- symphony. It's big, loud and about as fierce as a piece of music can be. Percussion, tuba and

brass punctuate the incredible sound emanating from the strings. Parts of the first movement, if used on a soundtrack, would scare the hell out of you at a movie.

The second movement is played at such a breakneck pace, it would be funny if it were not so spectacular. Conductor Douglas Sanford, in his notes on the piece, says this movement was intended to be a depiction of Stalin; so the tendency to think "this is amazing, but it's ridiculous" may be in line with Shostakovich's intentions.

In the third movement, the composer becomes more reflective, even pensive, before returning to the huge sound of the fourth. There were some beautiful moments coming from the clarinet, oboe and bassoons, haunting and lovely. The entire work was magnificently played, by musicians who must have been exhausted afterward.

Thank goodness it was Shostakovich on the menu, and not, for instance, Bach, since the loud sounds of Vesna in the TCU Place basement were starting to interfere with the quieter moments of the symphony. Noise emanating from other events has been worse in previous years, but it still goes on.

There was an excellent house in attendance, perhaps 1,500 or so, and the audience reacted three times with standing ovations -- one for Werner and the SSO, one after the Shostakovich, and one at the very beginning, before a note had been played.

Volunteers Terry Harley and Elizabeth Sliwa came out to present \$89,550 to SSO president Art Postle -- the record-setting proceeds from the SSO's book and music sale. The audience and the musicians stood for their volunteers in a truly heart-warming moment, which put the period on another successful year for the symphony.

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