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Robertson, SLSO win with Russian Romanticism

Sarah Bryan Miller

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When it comes to lush, colorful orchestral writing, tuneful and filled with musical exoticism, no one tops the Russian Romantics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

For this weekend's concerts by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, music director David Robertson chose three popular works that are exemplars of that school: Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 1 in F-sharp minor, op. 1; Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov's Suite from "Le Coq d'or"; and "The Poem of Ecstasy," op. 54, by Alexander Scriabin.

Heard Friday morning, the concert was relatively brief, but the fireworks found in its three compositions were more than sufficient for a much longer program. There was no curtain-raiser; instead, the music began with the concerto.

Pianist Stephen Hough, in a black apparatchik jacket and vividly iridescent green shoes, brought tremendous power and involvement to his performance. The first movement, *Vivace*, was a controlled explosion of intensity; the second, *Andante* movement was as lyrical as the first was intense, and Hough brought the whole to an exuberant finish.

He was beautifully accompanied by Robertson, a true collaborator. The connection between piano and podium seemed almost palpable, and the orchestra was in top form.

For bright, sophisticated writing, it's hard to top Rimsky-Korsakov. The enjoyably satirical music for his opera "The Golden Cockerel" translates well to its symphonic form, especially in moments of glorious, brassy pseudo-military swagger. Robertson and his players made the most of it, finding all the fun in the score.

The concert's finale was a suitably lush and vibrant reading of Scriabin's frequently sexual — as opposed to sensual or erotic — "Poem." It's a big work and heavy with brass, including, on this occasion, six trumpets, eight French horns, three trombones and tuba.

The brass players were in generally excellent voice. Robertson let them take off on the big climactic moments, but never at the cost of hearing the other sections. The string sound, in particular, was notably rich.

Many of the orchestra's principal players had fine solo moments; concertmaster David Halen's performance shone particularly brightly. It was reassuring to hear the orchestra back in its usual sterling form after last weekend's sloppiness.

These concerts also mark the debut of the Symphony's newest member, trumpeter Mike Walk. He's an extra player this weekend, but he won the audition to replace retiring stalwart Gary Smith.

sbmiller@post-dispatch.com | 314-340-8249

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