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A tale of two concerts

SF Symphony season in midwinter

by Philip Campbell

What could be better on a cold midwinter's night than settling in for a good story? The orchestral equivalent of a ripping yarn is program music, and for the past two weeks, the San Francisco Symphony has been offering concerts filled with some especially captivating tales. Most recently, regular guest conductor Charles Dutoit brought maybe the greatest storyteller of them all to Davies Hall, with a superior performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*.

Dutoit has worked with the SFS often enough to know that he will never coax a particularly sensuous sound from the strings, but he does get enough of a glistening sheen to create a lovely transparency, and this was gratefully apparent in the opening selection, Debussy's *Prelude to L'après-midi d'un faune* (*The Afternoon of a Faun*). This was a strong and detailed interpretation, less atmospheric than some, but one that easily conjured images of the original Vaslav Nijinsky choreography. (No, I did not see the premiere – the Joffrey Ballet has a bang-up re-creation in their repertoire.) While listening this time, I managed to keep the image of the faun's final masturbatory gesture locked in my own imagination, but could openly appreciate Dutoit's attention to Debussy's brilliant orchestration.

Igor Stravinsky's *Symphony in C* (1940), which followed, also benefited from the conductor's appreciation for orchestral details. Dutoit got a somewhat plumper sound than the lean neo-classical score usually receives (or the composer intended), but he had the orchestra playing with an edge that kept things in balance and highlighted the work's remarkable wit.

There is an audible hint of influence from, of all people, Rimsky-Korsakov in the *Symphony in C*. So it was perfectly fitting to end the evening with the mother of all program pieces, *Scheherazade*. Again, Dutoit aimed less for sensuality than virtuosity, and his pay-off was a thrilling account of a glorious old chestnut filled with episodes of visceral energy.

Concertmaster Alexander Barantschik displayed an uncommonly sweet tone in his note-perfect rendition of the taxing violin solos. If he will perhaps never have a very seductive sound, his intensely beautiful playing did keep the movements flowing with a strong sense of narrative.

Big piano

The week before, another favorite regular guest conductor, David Robertson, brought his own brilliant soloist to the spotlight. Stephen Hough blazed a trail through Tchaikovsky's humongous *Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor*, opus 44. The score is not one of the composer's greatest, but it hardly qualifies as shavings from the master's bench, either, and Hough certainly seemed convinced of the work's worth. His playing in each of the three lengthy movements (something like individual concert displays) was by turns overwhelming and exquisitely proficient.

The Concerto No. 2 is program music without an actual story attached, but Tchaikovsky's gift for melody always fires the imagination. When the audience leapt to its feet in unison for Hough's breathtaking performance, I was also thinking the composer deserved a lot of the enthusiasm. He might have left his soloist with bloody stumps, but what an amazing workout! *En Saga* by Sibelius and *The Poem of Ecstasy* by Alexander Scriabin filled out the second half of the bill. The attractive and appealing Robertson got moody eloquence from the orchestra for the former, scalding heat for the latter.

This week at Symphony brings Kurt Masur to the podium for Bruckner's Symphony No. 4, *Romantic*, but the really big news is the performance of Sofia Gubaidulina's *The Light of the End*. There are more story-filled nights to come with the new Phyllis C. Wattis Composer Residency of Gubaidulina. Michael Tilson Thomas will be back home to conduct the North American premiere of her Violin Concerto No. 2.

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