



Orchestra, Soloists Dig Deep in All-Russian Program

by : David Lowry

This is a review of the South Carolina Philharmonic concert held March 24 at the Koger Center.

This program had the title Mother Russia? (yes, with a question mark), and there was a time when such a program would not have been welcome in the United States. But the further away we get from the terrors of the world wars and Stalinist Russia, the more fascinating the work of Russian composers becomes. In the Soviet Union and elsewhere, we continually discover that despite horrendous economies, government intervention in the arts and composers having to emigrate from their homes, creative genius cannot be stopped. This program brought forth three examples of tonal color, brilliant orchestration, inventive harmonic styles and unflinching passion.



Martina Filjak

Sergei Prokofiev's Overture on Hebrew Themes is remarkable in that he used pre-existing melodies, something he preferred not to do. Yet his treatment of these Jewish folk melodies becomes fascinating under his pen. Originally a chamber work, he later orchestrated it, displaying a wide spectrum of delightful sounds. Maestro Morihiko Nakahara led a very pleasant and happy performance of this complex and rewarding work.

Dmitri Shostakovich's life is incredibly significant in that he survived the various limitations the Stalin government put on him as an artist. The government held his 1945 Symphony No. 9 in E-flat Major in low regard, calling it "thin orchestration and lighthearted sarcasm," but his international reputation prevented

punitive measures.

What our ears hear now is clear orchestration with demanding lines for all instruments, especially the winds, including a rare and demanding piccolo part. In five movements, Shostakovich presents playful and energizing textures, with significant parts for most principal wind

players. The fourth movement contains an incredibly poignant dirge that is an extended bassoon solo. In this performance, we found Peter Kolkay turning in an exceedingly fine performance of this heartbreaking lament. It was a performance that couldn't have been equaled anywhere.

The crowd pleaser, Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor — or RACHY 2 as musicians are fond of calling it — came after intermission. The way to please an audience is not only to program this concerto, but also to choose the right soloist to perform it. The Philharmonic did both. Martina Filjak has risen in recent years to the top echelon of the pianists' world — and with good reason. Filjak has the combination of brain, ears, big hands, education and stamina — all those things we tend to call "talent." Her 10 fingers create their own orchestra. It's one thing to hear a good melody on the piano, but it is another to hear that melody literally sing, while accompanying notes have character in their interplay. And with this romantic concerto, spiced liberally with 20th-century interest, Filjak has a magical way of taking liberties with rhythm that become lovingly passionate. Musicians tend to use the words nuance, or rubato. An artist takes it to another world where the power of music becomes sublime.

Maestro Nakahara provided solid gestures to match Filjak's rhythmic prowess, and the orchestra responded with great attention to detail and fine sonority. It was yet another case of realizing that most of us never envisioned having a civic orchestra that could play so beautifully.

The audience demanded more, and Filjak happily responded with a very touching encore. She chose a short work for left hand alone from Opus 9 of another Russian, Alexander Scriabin. It was the perfect ending for a Russian evening. Scriabin, for a brief time in his life, lost the use of his right hand and composed this work in a Chopin-like style. The work itself is written beautifully, and with Filjak's performance, one could swear she was using two hands despite seeing her right hand clasping the bench. It was an appropriately tender way to end a great Russian evening.