

Stamford Symphony Russian program emotional, personal

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By [Jeffrey Johnson](#)

"With Russian music, you can't go wrong."

These were the words of Stamford Symphony conductor [Eckert Preu](#) during his pre-concert lecture on Nov.

14. Preu focused on the "highly emotional and personal nature" of the music chosen for this program, which opened with the "Variations on a Theme of Tchaikovsky," by [Anton Arensky](#) (1861-1906).

Developed from the most successful movement of his second string quartet, Arensky used the fifth from Tchaikovsky's "Sixteen Children's Songs," op. 54 as the theme for this work for string orchestra. The Stamford Symphony played with charisma and carefully attenuated balances. They were particularly lyrical and soulful in the final variation, in C major, where the theme is played in inversion.

The Arensky variations are not heard live frequently, and sounded fresh. But they also set the mood for the extremely rare treat that followed: [Alexander Scriabin's](#) piano concerto. A live performance of the Scriabin piano concerto requires the confluence of several critical factors:

1. You need a piano soloist who has superhuman skill, but who can also be both playful and melancholy at will.
2. You need a conductor willing to work much harder than normal in a work with significant metrical challenges, and who is also confident enough to conduct a work that is completely exposed and which could fall apart at any moment.
3. You need a brilliant horn and clarinet soloist who both need to interact with the piano soloist.

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Here are the reasons why the piece came across as the emotional centerpiece in an evening of inventive and engaging playing:

1. Alexandre Moutouzkine is a musician of the first order. He met the technical challenges of the piano part, but was able to infuse the eccentricities in this score with a sense of warmth, wit and charm.

2. Preu was at home in the world of Scriabin. He has proven again that challenges bring out his A-game.

3. Clarinetist [Shari Hoffman](#) and hornist [Daniel Grabois](#) were fabulous both in this work and in the Tchaikovsky fifth symphony, where one or the other of them, or both in the second movement, seemed always present in just the right way.

But the stakes were raised also in that the work was played on a gorgeous Blüthner grand piano from the [Long Ridge Music Center](#).

This piano seemed to speak Scriabin. It was a beautiful instrument and it contributed in no small way to the uniqueness of the event.

After intermission we heard Tchaikovsky's fifth symphony. Preu led the orchestra with crisp rhythms and a clear sense of patience that allowed the over-the-top moments to matter. At the end of the work the audience burst into applause. The problem was it wasn't the end of the work. Even after 120 years the complete stop that Tchaikovsky wrote just before the coda in the finale still stands as a masterwork of humor. Gotcha.

As an encore the orchestra played the "Dance of the Swans" from Act 2 of "Sleeping Beauty" by Tchaikovsky.

This event was the perfect blend of familiar and adventurous.

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