



Saturday, March 10, 2007

## CSO, Bronfman showcase the dynamic Russians

"The 20th-century belongs to the Russians," said Paavo Jarvi preceding Friday night's Cincinnati Symphony concert at Music Hall.

"Look at the real giants, Stravinsky, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, Shostakovich."

It is hard to argue with him, especially when he goes on to demonstrate it so convincingly, and so did the evening's guest artist Yefim Bronfman in Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3.

The fearsome "Rach 3" (remember Geoffrey Rush in "Shine?") held no terrors for Bronfman, though the Music Hall Steinway may need a rest. Bronfman's commanding performance galvanized the audience, who rose in one collective, noisy ovation in tribute to his power and passion. They even demanded an encore, Chopin's turbulent "Revolutionary Etude" (Jarvi watched from behind the second violins).

Rachmaninoff was one face of Russian music presented on the concert. The others were Prokofiev in his delightful "Lieutenant Kije" Suite and Alexander Scriabin in his Symphony No. 2, a 1902 work not heard on CSO concerts in 35 years (Friday's performance was only the second in the CSO's 112-year history). Scriabin, said Jarvi, is "real Russian music," which he described as less organized, less polished and less "sophisticated" than the German symphonic tradition. But direct, brimming with emotion and completely over the top.

"Lieutenant Kije" (to be recorded by Telarc with Prokofiev's Symphony No. 5, scheduled for next weekend's CSO concerts) got a splendid reading by Jarvi and the CSO. Visiting trumpeter Mark Ridenour, associate principal trumpet of the Chicago Symphony, was Kije himself, sounding his lilting theme offstage at the beginning and end and performing the carefree trumpet solo in "Kije's Wedding."

(For the record, "Lieutenant Kije" was written for a 1930s Russian film about a fictitious Russian officer whose identity must be manufactured in order to please the Czar.)

Kije in love was meltingly captured by principal bassist Owen Lee, with felicitous contributions by violist Marna Street, cellist Eric Kim and saxophonist James Bunte.

Jarvi emphasized the falling-down drunk aspect of "Kije's Wedding," which ended in a sodden mosh of low brass, and also in the "Troika," a wild ride with raucous twists and turns. The lieutenant that wasn't was fondly recalled in "Kije's Funeral," where the various chapters of his made-up life were summarized.

Jarvi and Bronfman were not on the same wavelength at the beginning of the Rachmaninoff, where Bronfman favored a more subdued dynamic and could not be heard over the CSO. This was soon overcome, however, as

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they let the volume and expression swell. Amazingly, there was always a feeling of tenderness beneath the roiling passions and volleys of notes, especially in the heart-on-sleeve Adagio.

There was no sagging of momentum in the finale, either, which Bronfman built to an overwhelming conclusion.

Scriabin, a megalomaniac with a mystic bent (he planned a sort of mass rapture in the Himalayas triggered by his music, but died too soon to carry it out) wrote some gorgeous music nonetheless. Jarvi is a champion of the Symphony No. 2 and he led a convincing, inspired performance. The dark Andante unfolded on low clarinet (principal Richard Hawley), setting a pensive mood. The Allegro featured catchy, syncopated rhythms in combination with a sweeping theme and hefty brasses. The slow movement, "a garden of delights," said Jarvi, began with bird calls in flutes and piccolo and a warmly romantic violin solo by concertmaster Timothy Lees. Its yearning quality was reminiscent of Scriabin's best known orchestral work, "The Poem of Ecstasy," and Jarvi built it to frankly orgasmic heights.

A thunder-and-lightning Tempestoso followed (clashing cymbal, tam-tam, shudders of brass), then an all-stops-pulled Maestoso finale of Hollywood proportions (now we know where they get it). It was Wagner on vodka, with its triumphant theme repeated over and over, a stuporous pause, then double-time rejoicing to the slam-bang end.

Don't miss today's 8 p.m. repeat (and Jarvi's "Classical Conversation" at 7 p.m.)

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