

Madison Symphony Orchestra concludes season with all-Russian program

Dean Peterson suggests that special darkness of the Slavic bass in excerpts from *Boris Godunov*.

John W. Barker

Saturday 04/17/2010

For *Isthmus*

The final concerts of the Madison Symphony Orchestra's season prompt affectionate tributes from all hands to concertmaster Tyrone Greive, and his cellist wife Janet, who now retire together from the orchestra, pending replacements. This weekend's program debuted Friday night in Overture Hall.

These concerts are also the opportunity to present a program entirely of music by Russian masters. The lively opening piece is Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's dazzling "Russian Easter Overture." This fantasy picture of the Resurrection ceremonies in the Russian Orthodox Church allowed the composer to fuse childhood memories and Slavic patriotism with his fabulous mastery of orchestration. Music director John DeMain made the most of shifting liturgical moods and the MSO's kaleidoscopic talents to produce a blazing display of orchestral color.

The first of two guest soloists is French pianist Philippe Bianconi, who has delighted MSO audiences in two previous appearances (2001, 2003). His chosen vehicle is Rachmaninoff's "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini." Cast in the form of a theme (Paganini's most famous violin Caprice) with variations, this is also a kind of dramatization of the legend of the great violinist's supposed pact with the devil, the symbolic "Dies Irae" plainchant motive rung in recurrently and, at the end, triumphantly.

Bianconi gives a fiery performance, with the kind of powerhouse strength that recalls the composer's own playing -- yet, offset by fluent lyricism for the melting "hit tune" of Variation 18.

The second half of the program offers a series of excerpts from Mussorgsky's epic opera *Boris Godunov*, as performed in the old Rimsky-Korsakov version, sung in Russian, with projected English surtitles.

The composer employed the uniquely Russian styles of choral singing to make the chorus often the embodiment of the suffering Russian nation, thus allowing the Madison Symphony Chorus to become a major protagonist in this part of the concert.

The chorus is given a few bits from the Prologue, then the sections that open each scene of the "Polish" Act III (including the grand Polonaise), and then two episodes from the concluding Act IV. The MSC sings gloriously, though it is still hampered acoustically by its recessed stage location -- at least where I sat on the ground floor, it was virtually drowned out by the orchestra at the climax of the Coronation Scene.

The other protagonist in all this is the other guest soloist, no less than bass Dean Peterson, fresh from his wonderful performance as Daland in Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* last weekend, with the Madison Opera. He sings all four of Tsar Boris's great monologues: that in the Coronation Scene, the one early in Act II followed by the frantic "Clock Scene," and finally the Tsar's tormented death scene. Shifting skillfully from Wagner's German, Peterson manages to suggest that special darkness of the Slavic bass quite convincingly, while he is genuinely caught

up in the character and drama of each excerpt. His death scene, joined so thrillingly by the chorus, is truly gripping -- even if the chorus's last word is needlessly dropped.

Of course, a bundle of excerpts rarely can do justice to a full opera, especially one so vast and magnificent as this one. The result is, frankly, a bunch of disconnected fragments, perhaps a little puzzling to the listener not already acquainted with the full opera, for all of Michael Allsen's always admirable program notes. Or perhaps these magnificent excerpts might, after all, whet the appetite.

MSO and soloists combine for night of Russian music

Jessica Courtier

Special to 77 Square

Friday, April 16, 2010

Massive sound. A palette ranging from the mystical to the severe, and passing through the majestic along the way. No small measure of drama.

These are the things one expects from an evening of Russian music, and the Madison Symphony Orchestra, together with the Madison Symphony Chorus and soloists Philippe Bianconi and Dean Peterson, delivered them in abundance.

The concert opened with Rimsky-Korsakov's Russian Easter Overture, a study in contrasts between Christian Easter stoicism and boisterous pagan springtime celebrations. In between the musical representations of these two practices, a returning cadenza featured several section chairs in short solos, and it was lovely to hear individual performers exposed in this way. I also very much liked DeMain's interpretation of the first section of the piece. By developing a relatively understated voice there, the piling up of multiple themes, a brass fanfare, and ringing bells at the end was all the more dramatic.

In his third Madison appearance, pianist Bianconi performed Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. Based on one of the 19th-century violin virtuoso's caprices, the Rhapsody unfolds through 24 brief variations. Bianconi seemed altogether unflappable throughout the mercurial composition. He caught the essential humor of the second variation's numerous plinky grace notes as well as the fluidity of the more romantic portions. And in the final, monstrously difficult variations that border on the crazed, he moved in a precise blur, impossible though that may seem.

The second half of the program consisted of a series of excerpts from Mussorgsky's opera Boris Godunov, performed with the chorus and bassist Peterson. This portion of the concert was most engaging during Peterson's solos, as during a riveting mad scene, and when the choir sang in especially full voice. The pair of choruses formed by the coronation scene and its bitter twin, the finale, were fantastic. In an inspired move, a set of chimes used during the coronation scene was placed in one of the upper boxes, creating a gorgeous antiphony with another set of chimes on stage. My only complaint here was that at times the chorus and orchestra weren't quite in sync.

The audience gave especially hearty and warm applause at the opening and closing of the evening to concert master Tyrone Greive who, along with his wife, cellist Janet Greive, will be retiring from the orchestra after this weekend's concerts.

Classical music review: It takes a French pianist to make the most of Rachmaninoff

April 20, 2010

By Jacob Stockinger

On the Well-Tempered Ear

Often we link the nationality of a composer to the nationality of a performer. So we lean towards Russians – like pianists Vladimir Horowitz, Sviatoslav Richter, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Vladimir Feltsman and Olga Kern – to perform the music of their fellow Russian Sergei Rachmaninoff.

But that represents a certain kind of cultural chauvinism: Polish pianists for Chopin, French pianists for Debussy and Ravel, Italian singers for Italian opera, and so on.

Yet that approach or assumption is a fallacy and doesn't always work, as one heard so well during this past weekend's performance of all all-Russian program by the Madison Symphony Orchestra under conductor John DeMain.

The guest soloist for Rachmaninoff's "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini" was Frenchman Philippe Bianconi (below), a pianist who may be second tier in name or reputation, but is first tier in talent. (He won the silver medal in the 1985 Van Cliburn Competition.)

And there was nothing second-place about the performance he turned in of the virtuosic Rhapsody. It stunned you and moved you. It was the best performance I have heard, live or recorded – and I have heard some great ones.

Moreover, the very qualities that made Bianconi's reading stand out were the same qualities that one identifies with the French, not the Russians: a certain detachment that gives a sense of overall structure plus a combination of irony and sensuality with a good dose of playful wit (*jeu d'esprit*) that is inherent in the theme-and-variations format.

I recognize those qualities because, I confess, I am a lifelong Francophile.

The French relish clarity as they remain loyal to their Cartesian heritage of rational analysis and method. "La Passion de la raison et la raison de la passion" — the passion for reason and the reason for passion – go way back, even to the 17th century philosopher Pascal.

Whatever their origins, such French values all came together at the service of Rachmaninoff's terrific inventiveness with Paganini's famous theme, his gift for tonal color and his sense of heartfelt emotion (the famous 18th Variation that, in Bianconi's hands, proved to have sentiment without sentimentality.)

Small, quiet and charming, Bianconi (below) is an amazingly forceful, accurate and subtle player, with a strong left hand. He brought out lots of voices and always preserved the basic harmonic and rhythmic outlines of the theme. For each of the 27 variations, he knew what the

music required and what he wanted to do with it: He built both mood and meaning, and communicated them beautifully.

Bianconi is a great Rachmaninoff player. Not for nothing did he also play as an encore the opening of Rachmaninoff's underperformed and little-known but beautiful "Corelli" Variations to loud audience approval.

I hope to hear more from Bianconi, especially in a solo recital. (He is about to undertake a tour of China playing Liszt, Ravel and Beethoven's "Pastorale" Sonata.)

The MSO concert opened with Rimsky-Korsakov's "Russian Easter Overture," a good curtain-raiser that showed off all the various sections of the orchestra. The composer taught orchestration at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and has been called the best orchestrator of all time. One of the composers influenced by him was Igor Stravinsky.

The concert concluded with the Metropolitan Opera bass Dean Peterson (below) joining the Madison Symphony Chorus and Orchestra for selected scenes from Mussorgsky's opera "Boris Godunov." (He sang the role of the embattled tsar Boris.)

The choice worked better in concept than execution.

Aside from the famous Coronation Scene – which included church bell-type gongs on stage and in the audience in a high box – the music did simply not prove very memorable or captivating.

Peterson and the chorus both sang beautifully, especially in the difficult Russian language, which was thankfully translated and projected via sur-titles. And the orchestra played with commitment and precision. But even conductor DeMain had to signal the end the piece twice to let the audience know it was over.

Not a good sign.

This was the season closer, after all, and I kept wondering: Wouldn't a rousing version of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" (or maybe even his "Firebird" or "Petrouchka") have rounded the Russian circle? What about Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition"? Or maybe Shostakovich's tumultuous Fifth Symphony, or another of his symphonies.

But it was what it was, and everyone performed well – giving concertmaster Tyrone Greive, who soloed in the Mussorgsky, and his cellist wife Janet Greive, a fine sendoff into retirement after 20 years with the MSO. My criticism is of the music, not the performance or the performers.

One just would have liked to see that particular concert and this particular season end on more of a high note or crescendo than the weary and ill-fated Boris could summon.

Did you hear Philippe Bianconi in the Rachmaninoff Rhapsody? What did you think?

What did you make of the "Boris Godunov" scenes and how did you like the performance?

Review: A Night Of Standing Ovarions At The MSO

April 17, 2010

*By William R. Wineke
Special to Channel 3000*

When the concertmaster of a symphony orchestra receives a standing ovation just for walking out on stage, you know the audience is expecting a good night.

Tyrone Greive, concertmaster of the Madison Symphony Orchestra since 1990, announced Friday he is stepping down after this weekend's concerts. The affection the MSO audience has for him was evident from the minute he stepped on stage. Not only did they give him an ovation before the concert, but they gave him another at concert's end when Music Director John DeMain called Greive and his wife, Janet, a cello player in the orchestra to the front of the stage and led them off to cheers.

A "concertmaster" is an orchestra's violin leader. The concertmaster will typically play solo parts in a piece and is responsible for tuning up the orchestra.

In between Greive's standing ovations, DeMain conducted a night of rousing Russian music that kept the nearly capacity audience at the Overture Center leaning forward in the seats.

First, French pianist Philippe Bianconi played Sergi Rachmaninoff's "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini," a 1934 piece, a theme and 23 variations portraying the story of Paganini, an artist who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for perfection.

The story gets darker -- as this kind of tale is wont to do -- and Bianconi dominates the Overture Center's Steinway, pounding the keys with an intensity that virtually compels the audience onstage.

Then, Bass Baritone Dean Peterson -- who last sang in Madison only a week ago as part of Madison Opera's "The Flying Dutchman" -- donned white tie and tails and sang excerpts from Modest Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov." He was accompanied not only by the orchestra but by the Madison Symphony Chorus.

"Boris Godunov" is an opera based on 16th century Russia and Peterson's ability to convey the anguish of a Czar losing his son was indeed moving.

Musically, however, the hit of the piece involved Boris being introduced to his country as its new czar as bells pealed throughout Russia. The MSO had bells pealing not only on stage but from balconies and box seats; Overture Hall rang with bells.

Perhaps needless to say, both Bianconi and Peterson also received standing ovations. There was a lot of standing during Friday's performance, all of it deserved.

One interesting part of this week's performance involves not music, but the programs patrons receive. Customarily, program descriptions of the music mention whether and when it had been previously played by the orchestra.

The night's opening piece, Nicolai Rimsky-Korskov's "Russian Easter Overture," was first played by the MSO in 1939. The Rachmaninoff was first played in 1961. And Boris Godunov was sung here first in 1941 and, again, in 1942. This symphony has some history.

It is one of the best all-round concerts of the year and if the MSO were to give it a single motto, it might be something like this: "For those of you wondering whether you want to renew your season subscription tickets. . ."