

Review: A musical best of the season at the Phil

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If the performance at the Philharmonic Center Thursday was its prototype, classical music lovers are getting a huge price incentive with \$35 rush tickets available for this weekend.

Call it a cultural stimulus package.

Guest conductor Vladimir Verbitsky and an agile Naples Philharmonic Orchestra galloped through a 52-minute version of Rachmaninoff's huge Second Symphony with strong spirit and expression. That followed both of them joining forces with guest artist Belina Kostadinova for an animated reading of Schumann's Piano Concerto.

There were two standing ovations and five or six curtain calls after an evening that was a musical best for the season. Or, in contemporary praise, this concert was ready for YouTube.

Good playing is the foundation, and it was dead on, from Kostadinova down to Mark Goldberg, who created the tingly glockenspiel punctuation in the Rachmaninoff. Kostadinova is a nimble pianist who also has mastered a strong dynamic ability. She could shush her piano to a whisper without sacrificing clarity, then fire powerful -- but not banging -- exclamation chords at the orchestra in the exuberant final movement.

The Schumann is a stated favorite of hers partly because of its meal-in-a-movement Allegro Affettuoso, which was originally written as a self-contained work. It runs the gamut of tempi and works its way from A minor to major to A-flat; there's a short tribute to Chopin's "Carnaval." The infectious intermezzo, which alternately tiptoes and hang-glides, and the bounding final movement aren't back-seat movements to it, either.

Although Kostadinova is a veteran recitalist who has just released her first disc, yet she proved extremely adroit at working with the Philharmonic Thursday. Telepathy that was nearly visible arced from her to Verbitsky to the orchestra.

These works demand razor-sharp timing, which Kostadinova and the orchestra delivered with vortexes of piano whirling around staccato orchestral hops in the Allegro vivace,. The orchestra was also ready for Rachmaninoff's two drum explosions -- one of them cutting the first movement off cold -- that demand an orchestral burst right on top of them.

Those who say they don't like Schumann will find this performance a revelation. The truth may be that they don't like recorded Schumann. Live -- at least with these performers -- it's new and exciting music.

Judy Christy's plaintive oboe opening carries in the piano concerto, and other players fit elegant little solos into the Rachmaninoff symphony. There were violin phrases from Glenn Basham; a clarinet variation on the famous Adagio theme from Paul Votapek; and flautist Suzanne Kirton's work, to name a few.

The Rachmaninoff Symphony No. 2 in E minor came from the pen of a composer whose first symphony had been so soundly trashed he needed therapy to recover. The second, written in secret over six years, is more than redemptive. It washes over the audience in vast mother lodes of Russian emotion. From its anxious, lonely opening movement to the unchecked exuberance of its finale, it's continual catharsis..

Nearly everyone knows parts of this symphony, the most familiar being its third movement, retooled for pop star Eric Carmen in 1976 as "Never Gonna Fall in Love Again." The bright, upward spirals that open the final movement also get recycled for radio program openers.

It's surprising, given his fondness for solo instruments, how deft Rachmaninoff was at a power-sharing symphony arrangement. The themes move from section to section and are volleyed back a third of an octave up or with several notes changed. But there are undercurrents of instrumentation swooping under or over them nearly everywhere.

Verbitsky had them all his fingertips. He was immersed in the work and in his troops, now waving his arms, now pulling his fingers into tiny birds, with instant response in volume and attack. He and the orchestra performed like soul mates on both works.

We hope Verbitsky, already a four-time guest here, returns. But we hope anyone who appreciates good music doesn't wait for a next time. This is the weekend to see them.

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