

TSO's Master Works Concert: Stories to Tell

By Jim Dulzo

Standing ovations are pretty standard at Interlochen's Corson Auditorium when the Traverse City Symphony comes to play. After all, they are the home team, and classical fans rightly view this fine group as a precious natural resource.

But Sunday's concert did that tradition one better—there were cheers all around, particularly when Maestro Kevin Rhodes gave hugs all around after leading a galvanizing performance of the Rachmaninoff Second Symphony.

Mr. Rhodes wears his heart not just on his sleeve, but on his very being. He conducts with a precise stick, provokes with a lively face, and inspires with a body that dances out the tempos and accents. With the Rachmaninoff he had a vehicle that could not only stand up to his full-bore bravura, but fly with it.

The Rach 2 is tough—big in score, scale, and scope, with challenging parts for most sections of the orchestra. It whispers to the night and storms the heavens; it pleads and sighs like a lover; it risks drowning in Slavic moodiness. It's utterly romantic and, in the wrong hands, can leave listeners worn down, not lifted up.

But Rhodes plotted his tempos and dynamics carefully, and kept both in tight control. He launched the first movement's double-bass opening at a whisper; as the orchestra traveled along its many side roads, the slow build of emotions lost focus perhaps once. The bulletin-like second movement was terse yet fat sounding, with retards and accelerandos that kept the storyline intact and moving forward without peaking too soon.

The third movement was touching; it was taken rather slow, but did not collapse under all that emotional weight. Instead, it bloomed, making me wish for a lover's hand to hold.

The fourth movement was a romp—carefully but passionately measured, ringing the right bells and breaking into a full gallop at the right times. The orchestra, which played with impressive accuracy, hit the final climaxes, with their big brass chorales and waves of stringed jubilation, with clarity and fullness.

With Rachmaninoff, it's all about pulling all of those searing, melodic lines into something that makes emotional sense, sans hyperbole. Rhodes and company did just that, chapter by chapter. It was always clear where they were in the roiling, 50-minute story—a triumphant take that clearly was a special moment for TSO—players and listeners.

The concert opened with Beethoven's First Piano Concerto, a lovely thing that has flashes of the real Ludwig sprinkled throughout a score that is mostly about late

Mozart and extra-jocular Hayden. That playful push and pull was easiest to hear in the piano part, played with a fine touch and proper restraint by Spencer Myer. When the concerto leaned toward the classical, Mr. Myer was measured and square on the beat. But when it leaned toward later Ludwig, a slight and fine rubato emerged that underlined the budding master's sense of soulful drama.

That was particularly true in the second movement, taken at a quite slow tempo. In these hands, that was a good thing: the sighing lines were heartfelt reminders of the power of simple melodies, a key to Beethoven's lasting stardom.

That slow tempo nicely set up a sharp, pleasing contrast for the finale, which jumped out of the gate at top speed. What was lost in a totally unified string sound at that tempo was earned back with sheer enthusiasm and bouncy humor.

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