

10 POINTS FOR KAHANE, FERRANDIS IN SR SYMPHONY OPENER

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Rach 3 scored a 10/10 at the Santa Rosa Symphony season opener on 10/10, and will presumably do the same on 10/11 and 10/12. The first 10 (for style) goes to Jeffrey Kahane, who infused Rachmaninoff's late-Romantic masterpiece with thoroughly modern passion and drive. The second 10 (for technical difficulty) goes to Bruno Ferrandis and his attentive musicians, who provided the perfect foil for Kahane's pyrotechnics.

The highly anticipated performance of Rachmaninoff's third piano concerto, with its coupling of the symphony's former maestro Kahane and successor Ferrandis, got all the ink and most of the applause, but the second half of the program proved equally satisfying, with a sparkling performance of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 9. The only black mark was a weak concert-opening overture by a third Russian composer, the obscure Nikolai Miaskovsky.

It's hard to understand why Ferrandis chose to open the concert with Miaskovsky's "Salutation Overture," originally intended to celebrate Stalin's 60th birthday in 1939. It's Russian all right, a core requirement for an all-Russian program, but there are plenty of other overtures by better Russian composers (e.g., Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev) that would have opened the concert on a stronger note. Instead of "movie music," the Miaskovsky might best be classified as "newsreel music," the kind of ear cleaner one hears while watching historic black-and-white propaganda films of Stalin reviewing the troops. Mercifully, it was soon over and just as soon forgotten, utterly obliterated by the opening measures of Rach 3.

Kahane, greeted by a roar from the sold-out house, launched right into Rachmaninoff's bewitching concerto, leaning back to play the opening bars. He stared up, not down, as if receiving inspiration from some force other than his hands and instrument. He brought out elements of the lush piano line that this reviewer, for one, has never heard from other interpreters. His sense of rhythm was particularly compelling, at times almost jazzy, playing off the orchestra's solid beat.

In addition to his interpretive prowess, Kahane managed to make the piano utterly distinct from the orchestra. The notes from his concert grand rang throughout the Ruth Finley Person Theater, no mean feat in that acoustically dead space. Absent any evidence of microphones or amplification, all that sound came from the mighty carpals, metacarpals and phalanges of Kahane's hands, ably assisted by the rest of his frame.

The quality of Kahane's playing came to the fore in the lengthy cadenza near the end of the first movement. He flung his hands in the air after each perfectly executed run, with every note distinct and sonorous. Meanwhile, he was in complete command of dynamics, turning phrases from fortissimo to pianissimo with the flick of a wrist. When the oboe and French horn entered for their respective solos, Kahane transformed himself into a sensitive accompanist.

That sensitivity was on full display in the second movement, with its beautiful slow theme. Kahane's interaction with the orchestra here was magical, marred only by his odd decision to open and occasionally consult a not very well hidden score laid atop the piano's tuning pins.

In any event, by the middle of the rollicking third movement, Kahane gave up on the

score and reverted to full engagement with the orchestra and audience. He seemed to throw his entire body into the keys, often lifting out of his bench after particularly thunderous chords. When he reached the tumultuous ending, he jumped up, along with the entire auditorium, which gave him a loud and long ovation, quieted only by his serene encore, the "Evocation" by Isaac Albéniz, the first piece in the composer's *Iberia* collection for solo piano.

At intermission the patrons were all aflutter about Kahane's triumphant return, wondering what the orchestra could do to top that. A few decided to go home, accounting for a smattering of empty seats in the second half. They missed a performance that equaled the Rachmaninoff in every respect.

Despite their number (15) Shostakovich symphonies are rarely performed in the North Bay, and my guess is that most of the audience, including me, had never heard No. 9. What a great piece of music! And what a great performance! The first movement began with a sprightly tune in the strings, followed by an endearing piccolo solo. The musicians played with great intensity, positively romping through the festive score. In contrast to the heavy orchestration of the Rachmaninoff, the sound here was crisp and transparent, almost like a chamber orchestra.

The second movement offered a strong contrast to the first, with a heartfelt clarinet duet at the beginning, followed by lush playing throughout the orchestra, marred only by one oddly flat note from the upper winds.

The third, fourth and fifth movements, played together without pause, ranged across the entire orchestra, giving almost every section its moment in the sun. The third opened with a dazzling fanfare from the winds, followed by a trumpet solo, then an impressive trombone volley. The real standout, however, was a long bassoon solo in the elegiac fourth movement. The sound was haunting, mysterious and quintessentially Russian.

After all that anguish, the concluding movement was a joyous affirmation. Ferrandis, using relatively spare motions, egged his players on to an increasingly frenzied pace. They moved together as one to the breathless conclusion, which seemed to catch the audience by surprise. After a short pause, they burst into applause. It wasn't the thunderous ovation that Kahane received, but it was sustained, allowing all the symphony's talented soloists to receive their due.