

# Kahane rocks the house in symphony opener

Former conductor returns to play "Rach 3"



Photo: CRISTA JEREMIASON/ PD

By [DIANE PETERSON](#) *The Press Democrat*

Former Santa Rosa Symphony Music Director Jeffrey Kahane came home Saturday night to the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts to open the symphony's new season with a powerhouse performance of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3.

- [Symphony Gala](#)

The audience greeted Kahane with boisterous cheers and applause, even before he sat down to play the diabolically difficult concerto before intermission.

As one would expect, Kahane tackled the work's technical challenges with fearless athleticism, scaling the heights and the depths of the keyboard while delivering each musical phrase with clarity, poetry and panache.

"I love his playing, because it's not virtuosic for its own sake," said Gary McLaughlin, a former violinist with the symphony. "He's not just trying to impress, and he's not just pounding the keys."

Saturday night's performance marked the beginning of what is expected to be a Jeffrey Kahane "lovefest" weekend, with ticket sales soaring for all three concerts conducted by Music Director Bruno Ferrandis.

“We all love Jeffrey so much,” said subscriber Laura Chenel of Sonoma. “It’s good to have him back, even briefly, and to be in the presence of that talent and that gift.”

The weekend’s three concerts mark the first time that Kahane and Ferrandis have ever met in person, and it was a rare opportunity to watch the two seasoned professionals interact.

“Just seeing Bruno and Jeffrey together on stage ... it’s never happened before,” said Alan Silow, executive director of the symphony. “We’ve only had four music directors in our 82-year-history, and now two of them are performing together.”

Ironically, Kahane conducted the “Rach 3” with pianist Jon Kimura Parker as the soloist in May 2005 during the final concert set of his 10-year tenure as music director.

In a pre-concert talk, Ferrandis was asked how it felt to play with the symphony’s former conductor, who still conducts the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and is in his fifth and final season as conductor of the Colorado Symphony Orchestra.

“I love Jeffrey, and I love his playing,” Ferrandis said. “It’s a total event for me. It’s a happening.”

The choice of an all-Russian program was a wise decision by Ferrandis. Both the French conductor and Kahane share an affinity for Russian music, and this particular program offered a little something for everyone, from the sunny “Salutation Overture” by Nikolai Miaskovsky to the sardonic Symphony No. 9 by Dmitri Shostakovich.

“We love music, and we love Russians,” said Sue Butkus of Windsor. “We’re here to celebrate our Slavic heritage.”

“It’s an opportunity to hear some passionate music,” said Wlodek Kulawiak of Santa Rosa. “Listening to someone play Rachmaninoff on piano - it doesn’t get any better.”

As usual, the Saturday night concert drew a mixed crowd of music lovers both old and young, including teen-agers on dates and aspiring musicians.

“It was mesmerizing,” said Austin Meyer, 18, of the piano concerto. “His versatility is amazing ... and all the different dynamics. It kept you on your toes.”

At the end of the piano concerto, the crowd jumped to its feet in appreciation and continued to applaud as Kahane returned to the stage three times for a bow.

As an encore in honor of his new friend, Ferrandis, Kahane performed the first movement from Book I of “Iberia,” by Spanish composer Isaac Albeniz. Ferrandis has ancestral roots in Spain.

After intermission, the symphony performed Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 9 with a crisp edginess, nicely modulated dynamics and top-notch ensemble playing, especially in the woodwinds and brass.

The austere symphony, mocking and sarcastic in tone, provided an ideal showcase for players such as principal bassoonist Karla Ekholm, who illuminated the dark work with a searing solo full of heart and soul.

The Santa Rosa Symphony will repeat the Saturday program at 3 p.m. Sunday and 8 p.m. Monday at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts in Santa Rosa.