

TRANSCENDENT LISZT FROM LISITSA

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REVIEW FROM CLASSICAL SONOMA

Saturday, November 06, 2010

The Santa Rosa Symphony consists of about six dozen talented musicians, but during their Nov. 6 performance at the Wells Fargo Center, piano soloist Valentina Lisitsa completely stole the show. This thirty-something, blond-haired, steely-fingered Ukrainian-American is beyond talented. Her technical virtuosity easily matches any pianist of her generation, and her musicality is out of this world.

The Symphony, under Music Director Bruno Ferrandis, set the stage for Lisitsa with a spirited rendition of George Enescu's Romanian Rhapsody No. 1, the work for which this otherwise obscure Romanian composer is best known. The rhapsody is quintessential Gypsy music, starting slowly and accelerating to a furious pace.

The first clarinet and oboe opened the work with an assured duet, followed in short order by other woodwinds and the strings, who settled into a languorous waltz. Under Ferrandis' skillful baton, the entire orchestra glided into a well-controlled *accelerando*, culminating in a sparkling flute duet. The constant rhythmic shifts proved no obstacle as the orchestra evoked the mystery, gaiety and reckless abandon of Gypsy dance music. The sustained applause prompted Ferrandis to return for a curtain call and recognize the soloists, a rarity for an opening work.

The musical center moved from Romania to Hungary as Lisitsa traipsed onstage to play Liszt's First Piano Concerto. She seemed somewhat uncomfortable walking in her slinky, floor-length black gown. When she sat down to play, however, the attention shifted to her bare shoulders and sinewy arms. She displayed effortless poise during her dramatic first entrance, and she maintained that state of grace throughout the concerto.

Foremost among Lisitsa's many talents is her understanding of the music she plays. Unlike his many showpieces, Liszt's first piano concerto does have a coherent musical narrative, and Lisitsa told that story eloquently, dropping her voice to a whisper or raising it to a shout as occasion demanded. Each phrase had a definite shape, and her rhythmic drive propelled them forward into a spellbinding tale. She enhanced the sorcery by twirling her left arm in the air whenever her right was playing alone.

Everything about Lisitsa's playing was fluid, from her arm gestures, to the occasional tosses of her long hair, to the way she hunched over the keyboard and then leaned back. It was hard to believe she could generate such power from such a slim frame, but the evidence was incontrovertible, even from my balcony seat on the far right side.

After the sustained standing ovation, I met a friend in the lobby who offered me an unused ticket for a downstairs seat near the center of the auditorium. This happy coincidence gave me a closer look at Lisitsa, who returned to the stage after intermission to play Liszt's "Totentanz," the famous Dance of Death.

Lisitsa's playing of the concerto had been stellar, but her performance of "Totentanz" was intergalactic. She began with a ferocious attack that sent every muscle in her powerful forearms rippling. She soon followed with effortless glissandos from one end of the keyboard to the other, somehow sounding every note along the way. It was absolutely spellbinding. Under her hands, the piano became a different instrument, capable of an enormous range of expression, from evanescent pianissimos to thunderous volleys. There came a moment about half-way through the piece when it seemed that everyone in the auditorium was utterly captivated by Lisitsa's playing. She invested the music with such quality that it went well beyond notes on a page and into the realm of transcendent experience.

Yet another boisterous ovation led to a mid-performance encore, the Chopin E Flat Nocturne, Op. 9, No. 2. The contrast with the diabolic Liszt could not have been greater, the better to show off Lisitsa's tremendous range. The frenzy of the "Totentanz" gave way to a few sublime moments of blessed quietude.

Lisitsa was an almost impossible act to follow, but the Symphony, which had faded into the background during the Liszt and Chopin, made a game effort with Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra. Mr. Ferrandis set a somewhat slow tempo during the opening movement, and it wasn't until the fourth of five movements that the concerto finally caught fire.

The concerto moves from section to section of the orchestra, highlighting soloists or ensembles, as the case may be. The playing from each section was exemplary, particularly from the violas in the third movement and the trumpets in the last. The great trombone slide in the fourth movement was also quite effective.

The best, however, was when Mr. Ferrandis gathered all the forces into the pulsating, kinetic energy of the last movement. Here the entire orchestra worked together to deliver powerful music from a twentieth-century master. While not the transcendent experience offered by Lisitsa, at least it came close. The Symphony has rarely sounded better.