

Santa Rosa Symphony wraps up 85th season with all-Russian program

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The Santa Rosa Symphony presented an all-Russian program Saturday night with Music Director Bruno Ferrandis, wrapping up its first season at Sonoma State University's Weill Hall with an emotional arc that ranged from the tragic to the ecstatic.

The highlight of the evening came during the second half, when the orchestra knocked Dmitri Shostakovich's challenging Symphony No. 10 out of the park.

During this masterpiece, every section of the orchestra played fiercely and fearlessly, underscoring its savage beauty and gritty ambiguity.

The ensemble was especially tight during the militaristic second movement, a brief scherzo featuring scurrying strings and woodwinds punctuated by blaring brass and snare drum. (It is said to represent the jackboot of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet leader whose shadow haunted the Russian composer for most of his career.)

During the third movement, the orchestra cast a hypnotic spell, tossing off with precision the wry rhythms and quick mood changes of the quirky waltz.

The finale opened with haunting oboe and flute solos, then built up steam as the orchestra hurled itself into a bewildering whirlwind of anger and triumph, surrender and acceptance.

On the stage, the risers were back under the strings. Although the strings started the season on risers, they have been playing without them for the past few concerts, as an experiment.

In his pre-concert lecture, Ferrandis said that the risers make it easier for players in the back to see him. Soundwise, it certainly didn't hurt either, as the violins, violas and cellos have never sounded so sumptuous, especially during Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2, performed before intermission by Russian pianist Olga Kern.

Wearing an elegant, red gown, the 38-year-old pianist approached the uber-Romantic work with an introverted restraint that bordered on icy, but melted and softened as time went on. The accompaniment plainly overpowered the delicate texture of the piano in the first movement, but balance improved in the second and third movements, when Kern's virtuosic chops and clarity emerged.

The concert opened on a quieter note with Modest Mussorgsky's Prelude to "Khovanshchina," an opera left incomplete when he died in 1881. The peasant roots of Russia emerged evocatively in this version, orchestrated by Shostakovich.

While the kinks are still being worked out in the new hall at the Green Music Center, its resident orchestra appears to be adapting - and rising - to the hall's challenge.

The learning curve, both for musicians and audience members, will continue this summer and into the seasons to come. So far, so good.

The concert will be repeated at 8 p.m. Monday at the Green Music Center's Weill Hall.

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