

SYMPHONY REVIEW
Russian Near-Perfection
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By Thomas Goss

Discipline — the very word can carry an implication of emotionless perfection and, when used as praise, often suggests a somewhat inhuman process of application. But as the Saint Petersburg Philharmonic showed last Sunday night at Davies Symphony Hall, the root of the word is *disciple*, as was each of this youngish group of spectacular musicians. The excellence and uncanny accuracy they displayed was ultimately an expression of humanity rather than clinical bravado.

At the heart of this consonance is the conductor Yuri Temirkanov, in whose hands the conjoining of supposedly divergent principles seemed most organic in union. Precision met expression, as integrated as a nervous system runs a heartbeat in his interpretation of Shostakovich' Fifth Symphony .

The Saint Petersburg strings possessed amazing clarity in softness of tone, and deep radiance in loud passages without a trace of drag or grind. The elegiac opening of the piece was beautifully balanced, each string group standing out in clarity and joining in seamless cohesion. By contrast, the winds displayed pungency of tone and well-defined color. The chorales of the first movement were strong and clear; the first bars of the second movement were sweet and sassy, with just the right shade of slyness in the E-flat clarinet entrance. The solo work throughout showed individuality and grace, with well-planned emotional arcs and easy agility.

Handsome style on the podium

Temirkanov conducted without a baton, though sometimes the gesture of his fluid fingertips suggested. His right hand flopped one way, then another, revealing to the musicians the under and over of a measure. In the scherzo joking of the Allegretto, a sweep of the arm showered flurried droplets of harp and winds across the sea of musicians before bringing the phrase to a perfectly-timed end with a closing pinch of the other hand.

The gentle sadness of the Largo was ever more poignant in its simplicity, each new episode gradually peeling off with slow confidence until the dense, tragic heart of the movement was revealed. Following the bleak little chime of harp and celesta, the delicacy of the final muted chords was like a step into another world.

The brass section were unusually fine over the course of the entire piece, rich and sonorous in the first movement, bright and daring in the last, with stellar solo playing all round, particularly the first horn in the Finale. Temirkanov's tempi in this movement were carefully paced, unhurried in the often-rushed central section. The crashing coda was right on the

ruble, casual in its grandeur, generous in its economy.

A very different Russian

The Prokofiev 2nd Piano Concerto was an appropriate balance to the polished synergy of the Shostakovich. Even under the direction of Temirkanov, it was hard to keep the piece from going in every different direction imaginable, which in some ways is simply the way that it's written. But for the right soloist, as pianist Yefim Bronfman proved, it has a little bit of everything.

This piece of post-juvenilia, much overshadowed by its little sister the Third, is a plethora of influences and foresights. It rolls in post-decadent excesses, yet is tempered by all the sarcasm of young genius. Majesty and mischief are at times so blended as to become indistinguishable. And there is the added freedom of Prokofiev's early sense of form, not yet as calculatedly self-aware as works of later years.

Bronfman was equal in his gifts, whether rattling through the scalar circus of the scherzo or emoting the wonderful pentatonic glimmering of the Andantino's opening statement. His command of the recklessly written first movement cadenza was nothing short of heroic, not to mention Olympian. With the cautious help of Temirkanov, Bronfman and the orchestra got the defiance and introspection of the Intermezzo just right, with an absence of quirk. The flutter of intersecting piano and wind lines was feather-light and birdsong-fluid.

Peak performance in closing moments

The moody, warlike fourth movement was the moment of mastery for perhaps the entire evening. In the gruff opening, the lower strings and Bronfman's left hand growled as one voice. The bittersweet piano solo gave Terpsichorean lift to the counterpoint of the orchestra's intermittent accompaniment, while the aggressive culmination was no less mysterious than antic.

A more giving orchestra there never was. They seemed just as fresh in repeated encores of Liadov and Prokofiev, zipping and thwacking through the latter's *Death of Tybalt* with the same total alertness that they gave to *Ergo*, Giya Kancheli's sombre curtain-raiser. Both audience and orchestra seemed equally reluctant to leave the auditorium after the last bows. That's a situation we could use more of, I'm sure.