

# Broad Street Review



Solzhenitsyn: Excess energy?

Chamber Orchestra plays Mozart and Beethoven

BY: **Dan Coren** 05.06.2008

I can't think of a better antidote to the excesses of the Mahler Eighth than the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia's performances of Mozart's 21st Piano Concerto and Beethoven's Sixth Symphony that I attended the following afternoon.

Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia: Mozart 21st Piano Concerto; Beethoven Sixth Symphony (*Pastorale*). Ignat Solzhenitsyn, conductor and piano solo. May 4-5, 2008 at Perelman Theater, Kimmel Center. (215) 545-5451 or [www.chamberorchestra.org](http://www.chamberorchestra.org).

## Solzhenitsyn at high velocity

**DAN COREN**

I can't think of a better antidote to the excesses of the **Mahler Eighth** than the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia's performances of Mozart's 21st Piano Concerto and Beethoven's Sixth Symphony that I attended the following afternoon.

Musical director Ignat Solzhenitsyn was both soloist and conductor in the Mozart, and his performance left little to be desired.

Solzhenitsyn played his own cadenzas. As many concert pianists have again and again demonstrated (Alfred Brendel, wonderful musician though he is, is a particularly egregious offender), daring to compete with Mozart in this way is rarely a good idea. Solzhenitsyn's cadenzas, however, were terse, coolly hip and witty; they *almost* (well, there was, after all, only one Mozart) exactly replicated Mozart's harmonic language.

### Urgent and sensual, too

In the second movement—the one made famous for a while by the 1967 movie *Elvira Madigan*—Solzhenitsyn observed Mozart's tempo marking, Andante. That is to say, he took it much faster than practically anyone else does. I wonder if he was influenced by **this performance** by pianist Christian Zacharias, recorded in the late 1980s. At this tempo, which sounds so right to me, the movement became as urgent as it is sensual.

Solzhenitsyn is typically an economical, efficient conductor—he certainly was during the Beethoven symphony—but in the Mozart, perhaps stimulated by the nervous energy of being the soloist, he indulged in a great deal of overly attentive gesticulation and arm-waving when he wasn't playing the piano. I doubt an orchestra this good needs any extra "help," and indeed the players—or so it appeared to me—serenely ignored him and went about their business with the same impeccable musicianship, whether or not Solzhenitsyn was conducting them.

### A lush sound, with just five violins

It's hard for me to write about Beethoven's *Pastorale* without lapsing into clichés, simply because all those hyperbolic things that have been written hundreds of times about this wonderful work are true. Is there any other music that expresses the fullness of summer so well as this, the beginning of **the recapitulation** of the second movement? (This excerpt is from a performance by the Cleveland Orchestra under George Szell.)

As I listened, it occurred to me that, yes, there is one candidate: **this excerpt** (conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas) written by a young, optimistic Gustav Mahler near the beginning of his First Symphony. Who would guess, listening to this passage, that Mahler would be writing the empty, grandiose music of the Eighth within a decade?

The Chamber Orchestra's rendition of the *Pastorale* was revelatory. This really is a chamber orchestra—there were only five first violins, I believe—but somehow nothing of the symphony's lush abundance and ripeness was lost. As in the Mozart, Solzhenitsyn's tempos were unusually fast, especially in the first movement, which, at the speed he took it, sounded like the Philip Glass-like experiment in obsessively repeated motives that it is. In fact, the last movement was the only music in

the concert that had a feeling of luxurious repose—a wonderful way to end a long musical feast of a weekend.

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