

Solzhenitsyn speedy on Beethoven



By David Patrick Stearns

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Not that I'm hearing voices or anything, but as Ignat Solzhenitsyn sped through Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6* on Monday with the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, you could almost hear the thoughts of those who know the piece mostly from Philadelphia Orchestra performances. Isn't it supposed to be longer? What happened to the second movement?

> The tempos in Beethoven and the scintillating but speedy Mozart *Piano Concerto No. 21* made the concert a short-ish 90 minutes, but it didn't feel unsatisfying, if only because, agree with him or not, Solzhenitsyn made these pieces new experiences, and not at too-high a price.

> Solzhenitsyn's eat-my-dust pacing in Beethoven is much in fashion, now that the composer's metronome markings, previously thought unreasonable, are taken more seriously. This symphony in particular is the one least likely to be held sacred by conductors: Beethoven's descriptive weather effects in this "Pastoral" symphony were outclassed by Berlioz, and the piece's simple, repetitive harmonic construction doesn't make it easy to sustain. Speed is often a virtue.

> With Solzhenitsyn, there was a long-term payoff. Even the most placid second-movement moments had a strong pulse, so that after the symphony's storm movement, the final section's slow introduction was treated with hardly any sense of rhythm at all - the first time in the piece your ears hadn't been spirited along. The release of tension was profound. The movement that followed, nicknamed "Song of Thanksgiving," can mean as little as just a nice tune to tie things up. But here, it felt like the end of a war, and was the symphony's emotional center.

> Modern audiences are conditioned to equate magnitude of experience with magnitude of sound. That's not possible with any chamber orchestra. The fact that Solzhenitsyn created an even greater effect than your typical, big-orchestra performance with honest use of musical form made a splendid end to the season.

> The Mozart concerto was rescued from its own subtitle, "Elvira Madigan" (referring to the 1967 film about pretty people chasing butterflies). The middle movement shows Mozart in his best idyllic manner, with dreamy dynamic tension achieved by setting duple rhythms against triple. The effect is blissfully static and airborne.

> Doubling as pianist and conductor, Solzhenitsyn made every phrase speak its own mind at a pace far faster than the "andante" tempo marking would suggest. The *Elvira Madigan* sentimentality once added ingratiating veneer to the piece, but was always a 20th-century anachronism that wore out its welcome ages ago. I want to hear what's really there, and I did.

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