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By Mary Kunz Goldman NEWS MUSIC CRITIC

A rare Mozart concerto gets its due from son of noted Russian author

Ignat Solzhenitsyn, the son of famed Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, is in town. He is joining the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, conducting and playing piano in a program that includes Schumann's "Spring" Symphony and Mozart's 13th Piano Concerto.

In his 30s, Solzhenitsyn is a big, handsome man, a trifle ungainly, but charmingly so. He paused before the "Spring" Symphony to announce the Sabres' score, to general laughter. Other than that, though, he remained warmly focused on the music.

You don't often get to hear Mozart's 13th concerto. The meteoric string of Mozart concerto masterpieces known as the "Great 12" begins with No. 14, and beautiful but smaller-scale No. 13 is generally overlooked. Solzhenitsyn brought it into the spotlight, making a convincing case for its greatness.

Because he was conducting from the piano, the instrument faced away from us, its lid removed. You could see the whole keyboard, and Solzhenitsyn's hands, and the back of his head. Don't laugh: The back of his head was more dramatic than you think. He has a hip, chiseled haircut, and because of his herky-jerky movements, the top layer flew up and down on the beat.

In other ways, too, Solzhenitsyn brought out the music's excitement. His cadenzas had a loose, improvisatory feel, allowing you to imagine he was making them up on the spot. In the last movement, he lingered freely at certain transitional junctures, allowing wide silences, letting you feel how the piece hinged on a single note. He appeared to enjoy not only the concerto's melodies, but the architecture of the whole piece. His tone was assertive, standing out easily over the pared-down orchestra. (The violins sometimes sounded a little thin. Couldn't they have permitted one or two more?) It was a marvel to observe his articulation, which never wavered even in those taxing, exhausting runs Mozart loved to turn out. He also filled the melodies, some of which are haunting, with emotion and passion. The performance was easy to love. Solzhenitsyn brought the same ardor to Schumann's "Spring" Symphony, which followed intermission. He made a little less of the slow, stately introduction than others interpreters have. (Maybe he was serious when he promised he'd have us home by the game's third period.) But he and the orchestra sailed into the main theme with satisfying gusto, and the symphony soon attained an exhilarating momentum. The unhurried, deep slow movement was the highlight of the performance. But orchestra and conductor clearly had fun with both the first movement and the robust, lifeaffirming finale, which hints at Mendelssohn. This is music that makes you smile. It certainly hits home in Buffalo, where we can completely understand Schumann's elation at the end of a long winter. Celebrate! The concert, which began with the marvelous, breathless "Masquerade" Overture by Carl Nielsen, repeats today at 2:30 p.m.