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Maestro, musician partner gracefully

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Pianist and conductor Ignat Solzhenitsyn proved himself a stellar musical multitasker during Friday night's Classics II concert by the Toledo Symphony. Only two works were on the program, but the selection was inspired for this concert honoring major donors Fritz and Mary Wolfe.

Rising from his bench at the Orser Steinway center stage in the Peristyle, the maestro launched the orchestra into Mozart's charming Piano Concerto No. 11, one of the first the composer wrote while living in Vienna. If the orchestral takeoff was a bit wobbly, once Solzhenitsyn added his solo line on the keyboard, the reduced string orchestra plus horns and double reeds got with the program and provided savvy, supple accompaniment.

Well, accompaniment does not describe it as well as partnership. Clearly, whether conducting with generous yet focused gestures or rippling through Mozart's piano themes and ornaments, Solzhenitsyn was all about the music. He slipped gracefully into and out of the soloist role, maintaining lively if sensible tempos and pulling out highlights from within the score while shaping every section gracefully.

Noted conductor Ignat Solzhenitsyn plays on the Steinway before rehearsal on October 20, 2009 at the Peristyle stage at the Toledo Museum of Art.
(THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

Not only was he conductor and soloist, he also wore the composer hat briefly during cadenzas. "I play what Mozart wrote," he said at intermission, adding, "but if he doesn't provide a lead-in, I'll write it." Such was the case in the second movement, where the cadenza was a clever Solzhenitsyn-Mozart collaboration.

The Rachmaninoff Symphony No. 2, an early 20th-century work, gave Solzhenitsyn plenty to do without the keyboard. With big yet very precise gestures, he led the symphony through an inspired reading of the hour-long work. Particularly gratifying throughout all four movements was the rich and colorful string sound that drove the entire ensemble and established a fluid core for this exciting work. The orchestra seemed almost relaxed in the midst of even the most demanding passages - a far cry from last month's opening concert. But then Rachmaninoff's music, sweeping and gestural, is complex without the intense introspection and complexity of Mahler.

All in all, a wonderful musical evening that deserved more people in the hall than showed up.

Ignat Solzhenitsyn and the Toledo Symphony will repeat the concert at 8 tonight in the Toledo Museum of Art Peristyle. Tickets are \$20-\$50 with student-rush tickets at \$5 available one hour before the concert. Identification is required. To order tickets in advance, call 419-246-8000 or www.toledosymphony.com.

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