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Monday, February 28, 2005 - Page updated at 12:00 a.m.

A challenging Baroque program well executed with verve

By **John Sutherland**
Special to The Seattle Times

Concert Review

The last time Ignat Solzhenitsyn was in town, he wowed Seattle audiences with the giants of the classical era, Mozart and Haydn. This past weekend, he took one step back in time, to the masters of the Baroque, and the form of the concerto grosso.

The Seattle Symphony Basically Baroque concert opened with one of Arcangelo Corelli's famous concerti grossi, an appropriate introduction, since Corelli is essentially the inventor of this form. The Concerto Grosso in C minor is an ensemble piece with special emphasis placed on the first violin. In this case, that was associate concertmaster John Weller, who mastered the role with panache and dexterity.

In the third and final movement, Solzhenitsyn picked up the tempo to lend a hyperactive interpretation to Allegro, and Weller showed off his virtuosity with hummingbird speed and lightness.

Anchoring the center of the concert were two concerti grossi by Handel, numbers 5 and 6 from his Opus 6 collection. For these, the double reeds came out to join the strings and harpsichord.

The first concerto, in D major, raised the level of dexterity for the whole group. The most pyrotechnic of the movements was the Presto, in which runs of thirty-second notes came in relentless waves. The final Menuet movement was a stately, picturesque dance in which one could practically see the powdered wigs twirling about the decorous ballroom.

The second Handel concerto was in G minor, so its colors were naturally darker. The string players moved to broader strokes, particularly the fugue in the second movement. The most charming beauty in all the Handel, though, was the famous Musette, with its melancholy strings.

It's never a mistake to end on Bach, particularly on a Brandenburg Concerto. This concert featured the first of these, which spotlights the double reeds again, and most of all, the French horns. Even centuries later, we can see what a challenge Bach was creating for the horn players. It's as though the instrument was never meant to play these passages, nor was the human tongue. Principal horn player John Cerminaro was the absolute



Pianist Ignat Solzhenitsyn conducted the Seattle Symphony.

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hero of this piece, fairly dancing through what should have been a struggle, especially at Solzhenitsyn's "I dare you" tempo. It made for a perfect end to a charming and impressive evening.

The best conductors are invisible; they bring out music, and don't get in the way of it. Solzhenitsyn, still in his relative youth, challenged the group and brought out its best, and therefore already qualifies for this club of the very tasteful.

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