

Chestnut Hill Local

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Stunning triumph for chestnut Hill conductor

By Michael Caruso

Chestnut Hill's Ignat Solzhenitsyn conducted the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia in the opening of its 2005-06 season Sunday afternoon. Before an audience that virtually packed the Kimmel Center's Perelman Theater, the young maestro (and piano virtuoso) assured that his tenure at the helm of the 41-year-old ensemble continues to be marked by tremendous strides in artistic excellence.

Solzhenitsyn has chosen to brace the Chamber Orchestra's season with programs devoted to two of classical music's titans, Beethoven and Mozart. It was the former whose music commanded the season opener, while it will be the latter's final works that will be featured during the ensemble's final three programs.

The Russian-born maestro chose a program that avoided the humdrum by offering two less frequently performed scores – the Consecration of the House Overture and the “Triple” Concerto in C major, Opus 56 – alongside one that literally defines the term “warhorse” because of its regularity of programming – the Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Opus 67. Joining Solzhenitsyn and the Chamber Orchestra for the concerto were the members of the Eroica Trio: violinist Adela Pena, cellist Sara Sant’Ambrogio and pianist Erika Nickrenz.

Both the overture and the concerto were given convincing readings, but it was the rendition of the Fifth Symphony that stamped the concert as a stunning triumph for both conductor and orchestra. Solzhenitsyn's interpretation was a masterpiece of concise expressivity and the ensemble's manifestation of it in concert was remarkable.

Solzhenitsyn established the character of his approach to this well-known score by taking a no-nonsense take on its overwhelmingly familiar first two phrases, those hammer blows of fate that have come to define the entire canon of Beethoven's music. Conducted strictly in rhythm and in tempo, they were played with a level of technical accomplishment and expressivity that can only come from the hands of the most talented musicians. The result was an explosiveness that set the tone for the remainder of the score.

The string ensemble was flawless throughout the intricacies of the dramatic first movement, led splendidly by concertmaster Gloria Justen. French hornists Gabriel Kovach

and Karen McCommon offered stentorian blasts that were both immaculately secure in tonal projection and surprisingly lyrical in phrasing.

It was a pleasure hearing the Consecration of the House Overture Sunday afternoon because for all of its oddities of style and structure, it remains an ultimately satisfying work that has been unjustly pushed aside by some of Beethoven's other overtures. Solzhenitsyn and the Chamber Orchestra gave it an exemplary reading. I was less taken by the playing of the members of the Eroica Trio in the "Triple" Concerto. Pena's violin failed to soar, Sant'Ambrogio's efforts on the cello were characterized by rhythmic rushing during fast passages that went far beyond rubato, and Nickrenz elicited a leaden and colorless tone from an underemployed Steinway.

All the same, because the performance given Beethoven's Fifth Symphony ending the program was simply stunning, I'd encourage every local classical music lover to make it his or her business to hear the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia while Ignat Solzhenitsyn is still its music director, because I can hardly imagine that it won't be long before some major symphony orchestra beckons him to its podium.

MORE BEETHOVEN

Christoph Eschenbach opened the season of subscription concerts of the Philadelphia Orchestra this weekend with a program that paired two of Beethoven's symphonies – the First and Fifth – with the Orchestra's first performances of *The Shadows of Time* by Henri Dutilleux. It was a combination that I initially found and continue to find perplexing on paper and unsuccessful in concert.

The Dutilleux is an excellent work, written by the 89-year-old Frenchman between 1995 and '97 and deserving of many repeat performances, but its timbrally-based conception was ill-served by its placement between two of the most perfectly constructed examples of romanticism nearly bursting the seams of classicism as Beethoven's First and Fifth Symphonies. Even if all three scores had received exquisite renditions – and they didn't – I don't think that the program would have worked in concert.

Eschenbach and the Philadelphians gave a solid performance to Beethoven's groundbreaking Symphony No. 1 in C major, Opus 21. While the Bonn master's debts to his august teacher, Franz Joseph Haydn, are everywhere apparent (despite Beethoven's ungracious disclaimers), no less obvious are his departures from the strictures of classicism's emotional constraints.

Eschenbach caught the tension and its subsequent release in the opening movement. Textures were clear so that the rhythms virtually danced with excitement. If there was a shortcoming, it was tonal: the sound gleamed on the surface but didn't glow from within. The playing in the second movement was marred by lapses in ensemble and too little use of truly soft playing. There were occasional movements of uneven tempi in the third

movement, while the fourth movement suffered from infrequent but damaging rough edges of ensemble.