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Concert Review

Conductor's technique does justice to Mozart

By Melinda Bargreen

Seattle Times music critic

One of the concert world's best surprises is finding an artist who seems to get better every time you hear him. That's the case with the pianist Ignat Solzhenitsyn, who also has expanded his career into conducting in recent years.

His first appearance here, back in 1999 with the Mendelssohn Piano Concerto No. 2, was somewhat lackluster. But subsequent performances have been better, much better; a 2002 Mainly Mozart program shone, and last year's Shostakovich Concerto No. 1 was downright brilliant.

On Thursday night, the first Mainly Mozart Series program of the season brought Solzhenitsyn back for a concert that might be his best so far.

He conducted with a clear, unfussy technique that communicated the urgency and the delicacy of the music admirably to both the orchestra and the audience.

From the keyboard, he led a performance of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 25 in C Major that was a little masterpiece of suave understatement, full of dynamic contrasts and lovely, long swooping

runs of perfect evenness. Unlike many pianist/conductors, he handled the orchestra with ease, and never seemed distracted by his dual role.

The smaller, Mozart-sized version of the Seattle Symphony sounded solid and confident in this program, despite the fact that many of its players are currently playing in Seattle Opera's "Rigoletto" (that's why Mozart and Baroque series concerts, which both required smaller orchestras, are usually scheduled during opera periods).

Some of the top principals were in Benaroya Hall Thursday night; some of the sections were led by extra players who aren't Seattle Symphony members. The music certainly did not suffer, from the clean, gimmick-free reading of Mozart's famous "Eine kleine Nachtmusik" to the graceful and spirited Schubert Symphony No. 4 that concluded the concert.

The orchestra's principal oboe for nearly two years, Nathan Hughes, was featured in the Mozart C Major Oboe Concerto – a good chance to get to know this fine young player in something more extended than the occasional orchestral solo.

It is clear that Hughes is quite a find. He is not a showy player, and he doesn't command a huge tone, but everything he does is beautifully produced and technically adroit. His varied articulation, fluid passagework, pure and steady tone and great control made for a remarkable performance of the Mozart. We're lucky to have Hughes here in Seattle.

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