

## Youngstown Symphony with Cliburn finalist Tomoki Sakata (September 20)

by Robert Rollin



Last Saturday night the Youngtown Symphony opened its season with an excellent concert of Romantic audience favorites. The evening's highlight was a scintillating performance of Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Opus 43* by the gifted Japanese pianist Tomoki Sakata. Sakata was a finalist and the youngest competitor at the 2013 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in Fort Worth, Texas.

The *Rhapsody*, among Rachmaninoff's most popular works, utilizes as its theme the final movement of virtuoso violinist and composer Niccolò Paganini's *24 Capriccios, Op. 1* for solo violin. Rachmaninoff composed twenty-four variations and produced an imaginative composition that groups them in three parts analogous to the three-movement structure of a piano concerto. The slower middle section quotes the medieval *Dies irae* theme and closes with the tuneful and beloved D-flat major section which Sakata presented powerfully and expressively. In the cyclical style typical of the late Romantic period, the *Dies irae* theme returns in the finale along with the *Rhapsody*'s main theme.

Sakata displayed remarkable technique, particularly when playing the many decorative grace notes and the powerfully thick, punctuating chords ever-present in Rachmaninoff's very personal style. The tall young pianist projected an intense energy suited to the composition, and conductor Randal Craig Fleischer and the orchestra performed with poise and élan. The audience reacted with thunderous applause.

For his encore, Sakata played the solo version of Gershwin's *Fascinating Rhythm*, performing it as fast as possible. Though some of the musical details were obscured, the audience responded enthusiastically.

The performance of Antonin Dvořák's *Symphony No. 9 in E Minor* (from the New World) was workman-like but had flashes of brilliance. Dvořák composed the symphony during his three-year stint as director of the National Conservatory of America in New York (1892-95), when his student Harry T. Burleigh helped expose the composer to African and Native American poetic and musical styles.

The work's dark slow opening in the cellos and basses gives a sense of distance that might suggest Dvořák's physical and emotional move to the New World. In the *Allegro molto*, the entire brass section, especially the horns, performed nobly, and the woodwinds played with distinction throughout. Though effective, the strings could have played with more presence in the tutti sections.

The orchestra really excelled in the wonderful second movement, *Largo*, where Dvořák moved the E-minor tonality down a daring chromatic minor third to D-flat major. English hornist Mary Kausek presented her three stunningly beautiful solos with great flair and expression. The other two themes in minor tonalities were equally gorgeous.

The Scherzo, marked *Molto vivace*, introduced triple meter for the first time and featured lilting, sparkling syncopations. The finale, *Allegro con fuoco*, had a more majestic mood, and in the powerful tutti, a balanced power that helped drive the piece to its intense conclusion.

Ludwig van Beethoven's *Egmont Overture, op. 84*, appropriately followed the National Anthem at the beginning of the program. Goethe's 1787 play of the same name provided source material for an Imperial and Royal Court Theater commission of incidental music.

Count Egmont is a tragic figure whose wife commits suicide in frustration at not being able to save him from execution by the tyrannical Spaniards. She appears to him on the eve of his execution as the goddess of freedom and promises him that his death will inspire a revolt that will unseat the occupying forces.

After a short, slow introduction, the orchestra delineated the tragic F-minor opening material and its contrast with the more lively and disjunct A-flat major second theme. Following a short development, the recapitulation moved to bright D-flat and F-major tonalities and ended with an affirmation of triumph and hope embodied in the piccolo solo and the powerful closing *tutti*. The performance was brisk and effective.

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