

## Concert Report: Youngstown Symphony— From Russia with Love (February 6)

Published February 15, 2010

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Despite the huge snow storm, the Youngstown Symphony's fourth main stage concert took place Saturday evening, February 6, with a good audience turn out. The concert was an excellent program of Russian music. Conductor Randall Craig Fleischer was Rostropovich's assistant with the National Symphony, so it is no surprise that he performs this genre with excitement, expertise, and flair. The highlight was a wonderful performance of the Rachmaninoff 'Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Opus 18'.

Soloist for the concert was the gifted and lovely Ukrainian pianist, Valentina Lisitsa, replacing Olga Kern, who had visa difficulties. Lisitsa has performed chamber music with the likes of Hilary Hahn and Lynn Harrell, and has a remarkable expressive range. From the opening piano first-movement solo chords she showed the kind of power tempered by nuance that is required for this beloved concerto. The strings, woodwinds, and horns accompanied beautifully. The viola section introduced the E flat major second theme with grace, and Lisitsa responded with great expression and brought out accompaniment elements clearly. There was a lovely horn solo as well.

The Adagio sostenuto second movement was simply gorgeous. Lisitsa deftly negotiated the rhythmic complexity of a piano first entrance that has

duple patterns hidden in its triplets. The solos in the high woodwinds were excellent. Later she brought out inner voices without sacrificing main-line clarity in the lyrical second theme. The expression by soloist and orchestra alike was truly worthy of this great movement. Lisitsa's cadenzas were precise and effective.

The third movement, Allegro scherzando, returns to the original tonality from the distant E major key, bringing energy and power to the conclusion. The interplay between orchestra and soloist was terrific, as Fleischer brought the piece to an effective close.

The Stravinsky suite from the 'Firebird Ballet', was originally composed for large orchestra in 1910. It was arranged by the composer for smaller forces in 1919 in the wake of World War One. The smaller version's five short movements were nicely performed by the Symphony -- a logical choice in the current economic climate. The Introduction started a bit weakly in the basses, and some entrances in the horns were a bit awkward. Stravinsky's interesting coloristic palette, though entirely different from Rachmaninoff's, is remarkably splashy and effective. Rimsky-Korsakoff, Stravinsky's teacher literally wrote the book on late nineteenth-century orchestration, and Stravinsky fully absorbed it and expanded on it in the 'Firebird'. The gentle strains for the Ronde des princesses and the Berceuse show the influence of French Impressionism, while the sections on the Firebird and the Kastchei, the splashy color of the Russian style. A few rhythmic problems marred the latter passages, but the oboe and cello solos in the Princesses' Round Dance were especially lovely.

The concert began with a solid performance of Mussorgsky's tone poem, 'Night on Bald Mountain' in Rimsky-Korsakoff's wonderful orchestration. The pagan Russian folk-tale sources yield darks spirits, a black mass, and a witches' Sabbath, followed by the gentle beauty of a village church and its bell. The powerful sections were well-balanced with fine playing by woodwinds, strings and percussion. The slow conclusion had the appropriate gentleness and quiet beauty.