



Concert Review: Vadim Gluzman's bow strikes sparks with Andrey Boreyko and the St. Louis Symphony at Powell Hall Friday through Sunday, November 16-18

Physics may tell us that you can't strike sparks with wood, but I'm here to tell you that Vadim Gluzman did exactly that with his exhilarating performance of the Tchaikovsky "Violin Concerto" Friday morning. The difficult first movement cadenza, in particular, was mesmerizing in its intensity and precision.



Tchaikovsky appears to have written the concerto as a kind of therapy after his disastrous attempt at marriage failed and he was plunged into the despair heard so tellingly in his "Symphony No. 4". The concerto, by way of contrast, is unfailingly sunny. It's also technically demanding, although you'd hardly have known it from Mr. Gluzman's seemingly effortless performance. He played the way Fred Astaire danced. The audience awarded him with applause after the first movement and a standing ovation at the end of the piece.

Russian-born guest conductor Andrey Boreyko, who began his tenure as Music Director of the National Orchestra of Belgium this season, provided a sensitive and nuanced accompaniment that was, in its own way, every bit as spectacular as Mr. Gluzman's performance.

Mr. Boreyko's style on the podium, to begin with, was fascinatingly idiosyncratic. He was very physically expressive and used the baton sparingly, often setting it down and using his hands to seemingly shape phrases in the air. At times he even mimicked the actions of players, with a sawing action here for the strings or a wiggle of the fingers here for a trill in the winds. It brought to mind the showy style of the late Leopold Stokowski.

Let me not, however, leave you with the impression that Mr. Boreyko was all style. His approach to both the concerto and the other two works on the program was solid and insightful, and it served Tchaikovsky very well.

This was perhaps most apparent in the closing work, the rarely heard “Symphony No. 1”, subtitled either “Winter Dreams” or “Winter Daydreams”, depending on how you translate the Russian. The composer agonized over the work, revised it substantially six years after its premiere in 1868, and didn’t get to hear a full performance of the final version until 1883. It’s a piece I have always found captivating, from the first movement’s mysterious evocation of a wintry landscape, to the melancholy beauty of the adagio (with its flute and oboe duet played beautifully by Mark Sparks and Barbara Orland, respectively), the swirling snowstorm of the Scherzo (which seems to anticipate the “Dance of the Snowflakes from “Nutcracker), and the sharp contrasts of the folk-song-based finale. This is a work of extremes in tempi and dynamics, and Mr. Boreyko fully exploited all of them while still pulling everything together into a coherent whole.

That same willingness to follow Tchaikovsky’s highly expressive lead was apparent in the opening work, the even more rarely heard symphonic poem “Voyevoda” from 1890. Like most of you, I expect, my only exposure to this piece has been on CDs or classical radio stations. The score calls for an orchestra of nearly Mahlerian proportions, including relatively uncommon instruments like the bass clarinet, celesta, and harp. It’s a lot of personnel for a highly poetic ten-minute piece that doesn’t even have (to quote a line from “Amadeus”) “a good bang at the end...to let them know when to clap.” Mr. Boreyko fearlessly went where the composer led him, and I found the result immensely satisfying.

Written by Chuck Lavazzi