

Music review: Spectacular, idiomatic Tchaikovsky from the SLSO

By Sarah Bryan Miller November 16, 2012



With a can't-miss program of three works by one of the world's most beloved composers, two important debuts and the elite St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in top form, this weekend's concerts at Powell Symphony Hall deserve to be sell-outs.

The composer is Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, represented on the program by one brief rarity and two greatest hits. The debutants are two outstanding musicians from the former Soviet Union, Russian conductor Andrey Boreyko and Ukrainian-Israeli violinist Vadim Gluzman. The SLSO sounded absolutely inspired, with scarcely a false note on Friday morning.

Boreyko, who was dressed in a manner reminiscent of a 19th century clergyman, brought a strong but never flashy presence and a clear and authentic musical vision to the podium. "Revelatory" is not too strong a word for his conducting. He knows precisely what he wants and how to elicit it, and the players seemed to enjoy providing it.

The concert opened with the latest of the three compositions on the program, the 1890 "Voyevoda," Symphonic Ballad after Mickiewicz. Lush, Romantic and filled with great writing for the low brass, it describes a love triangle that ends tragically, with vengeance that turns in an unexpected direction for a big, dramatic conclusion.

It made a good lead-in for Gluzman's dazzling reading of the Violin Concerto. Gluzman (who, in contrast to the morning's conductor, favors the buttoned-up apparatchik look) is an amazing technician who plays a celebrated instrument, the 1690 "ex-Leopold Auer" Stradivari once owned by the violinist to whom Tchaikovsky dedicated his concerto.

He gets a gorgeous singing tone out of it, particularly in the slow middle movement, but it seems likely that Gluzman could make almost any violin sound good. And if he impressed with his facility in the first movement, he was absolutely spectacular in the third, with incredibly fast, clean runs. Boreyko and the orchestra were with him all the way as accompanists and colleagues.

The second half was a beautifully idiomatic reading of the Symphony No. 1 in G minor, "Winter Dreams." Written — with considerable struggles — in 1866-1868, soon after Tchaikovsky finished his formal musical studies, it evokes Russia in its extensive use of Slavic folk tunes and harmonies, and in its dark, wintry chords.

Boreyko and the orchestra were perfectly in tune with that vision in every way. The strings played with burnished sound; the woodwinds were in uniformly good voice, and the brass made the most of the opportunities the composer had provided them. It is to be hoped that Boreyko returns next season.

Sighted before the performance began: the SLSO's president and CEO, Fred Bronstein, seating patrons in the Dress Circle. That's what you call a full-service administrator.