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Andris Nelsons and the Boston Symphony Orchestra were joined by pianist Nikolai Lugansky last night for a program of Kancheli, Rachmaninoff and Shostakovich. Courtesy Photo/Michael Blachard, BSO



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BOSTON - The presence of the past weighed mightily on the Boston Symphony Orchestra program Thursday evening at Symphony Hall. But the music was full of life, thanks to the increasingly transparent methods of music director Andris Nelsons, vibrant solo involvement, and an orchestra showing its full commitment and technical command.

Nelsons has returned for a spring session with the BSO, and his first program had broad ambitions: The American premiere of Giya Kancheli's "Dixi," for chorus and orchestra; Rachmaninov's lush and popular "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini," with piano soloist Nikolai Lugansky; and Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony, furthering the BSO's ongoing recording project of that composer's works.

"Dixi" was commissioned in 2009 as part of a set of works responding in some way to the Beethoven symphonies. Kancheli, working with the Ninth, made his response symbolic, with the inclusion of chorus truly the only thing that resembles Beethoven's work.

Kancheli intersperses aphoristic Latin phrases - in no way meant to be a narrative - with brash orchestral moments. The orchestra begins playing short phrases at its loudest, followed by the chorus singing short phrases at its softest.

The effect ironically spotlights the text - the Tanglewood Festival Chorus sang beautifully

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A forest of microphones proclaimed (visually, at least) the presence of Shostakovich on the program. Working his way through the Deutsche Grammophon recording project of the Stalin-era compositions, Nelsons programmed the Eighth for these concerts.

Composed and premiered in 1943, this symphony shows Shostakovich variously acknowledging, side-stepping and confounding the expectations of his Russian audience and the authorities. The Eighth is bold but not heroic, beautifully optimistic but not delusional.

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under the direction of Betsy Burleigh. The Latin mixes sacred snippets with vernacular, often contrasting images of light and dark.

Unusual vocal staccatos and rhythms, and quite unusual instrumentation (including accordion, played with shocking tenderness by Katherine Matasy), created a sound-world that made "Dixi" an easy place to be, even on first hearing.

Rachmaninov's "Rhapsody" contains some of the most memorable music of the 20th century. A theme-and-variations based on Paganini's famous 24th Caprice, the work is as much a variation on the idea of Paganini as it is on his music.

The Caprice is there, for sure, but Rachmaninov, himself a virtuoso of great renown, reaches out for the spirit of his virtuoso predecessor, incorporating not only demanding piano technique, but the Dies Irae theme, invoking Paganini's mythological pact with the devil.

Lugansky eased into the keyboard challenges, and the orchestra swept along behind him. Although there are many fancy solo passages, the "Rhapsody" is a true partnership between ensemble and soloist. Nelsons kept the focus on balance, and Lugansky played with confident command.

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