

Boston Symphony Orchestra throws a party

By Keith Powers

If this were a museum exhibition you'd call it big, red and shiny.

The Boston Symphony Orchestra's all-Russian program had all the easy elements for opening night appeal: flamboyant soloist, popular conductor, upscale partiers and music that offered very few detours on a swanky Saturday evening road to happiness.

Pianist Lang Lang joined music director Andris Nelsons and the orchestra for the Symphony Hall festivities. While the upcoming season offers numerous premieres, tricky works and outsized choral settings, opening night was pure rock 'n' roll.

Shostakovich's bright and barreling "Festive Overture," Prokofiev's third piano concerto, and Mussorgsky's riot of sound, "Pictures at an Exhibition," in Ravel's stupendous orchestration, provided an evening of accessible music with hardly a break for introspection.

Well, almost. Prokofiev's inviting concerto, its three inventive movements a natural blend of classic styles, jazzy notions and sophisticated rhythms, may have provided the flash that a soloist like Lang Lang needs. But it brought challenges as well—challenges this soloist brings substantial skills in overcoming.

The middle movement stands out. A theme and variations, built around an ungainly gavotte, stretches all the musicians in every way. The orchestra builds the melody with blocks of ideas, full of potential but hardly—at first—crafted completely. In the five variations that follow, the soloist veers from music-box pretty to syncopated de-construction.

Nelsons and his orchestra participated equally in the workout. The solo part certainly is virtuosic, but so is the orchestral part. And while Lang Lang may have this generation's copyright on showmanship, Nelsons is no slouch in the large gesture department. Soloist and orchestra both gave, and both took. The interaction was a physical thrill.

The slow fourth variation, with the soloist kind of chanting the melody ritualistically, sounded like alien music. Even the syncopated variation, so riotous at one point that every musician onstage seemed to have different music, seemed suited to this performance.

Lang Lang will always be annoyingly flamboyant, or crowd-pleasingly flamboyant—your choice. But it's not showing off if you can do it. The large romantic gestures, the faraway gazes, sticking pauses up to the point of over-interpretation—if you like this, and everyone seemed to—you like it. The guy can play. A Manuel Ponce intermezzo was his encore choice—hardly Russian, but sweetly played.

"Pictures at an Exhibition" suffers some from being overplayed, and in other ways from being unrelentingly brash. But Ravel created beautiful, colorful music from Mussorgsky's piano score, exploring many variegated orchestral shades in breathtaking fashion.

The back of the orchestra enjoyed the spotlight the most: Nelsons had almost a dozen soloists (Rowe, Rolfs, Sheena, Sommerville, Genis, Oft, Hudgins, Svoboda, and others) enjoying a bow at the end.

The weighty concerns ("Der Rosenkavalier," this year's opera concertante, opens Thursday) will come soon enough. For this opening night, the party mood was served without apology.

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