

Pianist Inon Barnatan confidently tackles beastly concerto

Posted Jan 6, 2018 at 1:15 PM

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By Keith Powers

Contributing writer

When he was named the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra's music director last year, the first phone call Yaniv Dinur made was to pianist Inon Barnatan.

After Friday evening's performance at the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center, we know why.

As part of the most ambitious NBSO program in memory, Barnatan brought his intense engagement and technical expertise to bear on Rachmaninov's third piano concerto, one of the most challenging — and rewarding — works in the repertory. Hardly satisfied with one musical mountain to climb, Dinur led the orchestra in Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" after intermission.

The Israeli-born Barnatan has just completed a three-year tenure as the New York Philharmonic's artist-in-residence, a position that led to multiple programs of his own devising with that orchestra. He is active as a concerto soloist and recitalist all over the world, and his presence onstage with the NBSO clearly infused the orchestra with a special sense of purpose.

Barnatan may have previously performed with many of the greatest orchestras, but he still thoroughly invested this performance with inspiring professional energy. Listening carefully to his stage-mates, he tackled the often beastly concerto with disarming confidence.

Listeners could tell this would be special, right from the first movement. A pair of cadenzas — the first brief and charming, the second elaborately developed — showed not only Barnatan's virtuosity, but his collaborative commitment.

The first cadenza — it comes early, and passes quickly — has the soloist tarry over the concerto's famous "Russian hymn" theme, followed by delicate accents from wind soloists.

The second cadenza, a true star-turn, pounds out the staccato second melody of the movement, develops it broadly, and then interpolates echoes of the original Russian hymn melody from flute (Timothy Macri), oboe (Laura Shamu) and clarinet (Margo McGowan). And it's still not done: the wind accents are only an interruption, and the soloist develops further ideas, with a kind of free interpretation of the second melody.

It was a beautiful, complex-yet-understandable moment, realized through Barnatan's easy brilliance and his engaging interplay with the orchestra. And it was only the first movement.

The middle movement, beginning with an extended orchestral opening that amounts to the pianist's only break in the entire concerto, takes a slow melody, which appears almost incomplete, and intensifies it. Again and again echoes of the Russian hymn melody (it's not actually a hymn at all) recur. At least half-a-dozen modulations change the sonic atmosphere.

The final movement, as full of purpose as the second movement was full of questions, attacks without pause from the slow movement. Again the Russian hymn theme recurs. At one stuck rest, as the climax built, Barnatan spread his arms as if to welcome his stage-mates into the dramatic concluding effort.

It was a moving, confident performance of a demanding work, one that everyone onstage and in the audience is sure to remember.

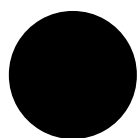
The audience was smaller than usual for NBSO performances, due no doubt to the challenges of the weather. More's the pity: after intermission, Dinur led his orchestra — supplemented by an unusually large cadre of extra wind, brass and percussion players — in Stravinsky's notorious and robust ballet score.

Beginning with an extensive wind ensemble introduction, highlighted by principal bassoonist Michael Mechanic carving out the famous opening melody, the orchestra stormed through the polyrhythmic work.

Dinur stayed four-square to the beat, and primarily let his excellent percussionists — led by principals Eric Huber (timpani), Tom Schmidt (percussion), and fortified by distinguished guest Robert Schulz — weave in the more complex polyrhythmic sections.

Still exotic and compelling one century after its debut, "Rite of Spring" proved an appropriate challenge for the orchestra, and served as a signal that Dinur will not be shy about tackling outsized works in the repertory.

The NBSO's next performance will be Movie Night Pops Concert on Saturday, March 31, at 7:30 in the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center. Music director Yaniv Dinur will conduct themes from films like "Lord of the Rings," "Schindler's List," "Star Wars," "Cinema Paradiso" and others. For information and tickets visit www.nbsymphony.org or call the Z box office at 508-994-2900.



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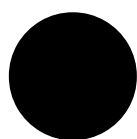
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