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REVIEW

Review: Stellar pianists at heart of impressive NBSO concert

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Maestro David MacKenzie and guest artist Jean-Efflam Bavouzet acknowledge the applause of the audience at the New Bedford Symphony concert Saturday evening. COURTESY OF RICHARD VAN INWEGEN

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By Keith Powers
Contributing writer

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The New Bedford Symphony Orchestra began Saturday evening's concert at the Zeiterion Performing Arts Center by playing the music of 3,600 composers. Then they played two concertos and a symphony as well.

No lie. Music director David MacKenzie started the concert by showcasing the results of the NBSO's outstanding educational outreach program headed by Terry Wolkowicz. After a multi-disciplinary study of the evolution of locomotion, students from across the SouthCoast created melodic fragments based on swimming, crawling, walking and flying.

MacKenzie arranged the thousands of snippets into a five-minute work, using all the orchestral colors, with bright dynamics and spotlighted by bold entrances across the stage. It was a nice tribute to the expansive programs, which have become a benchmark for orchestra outreach across the country.

The adult portion of the program began with a rarity: Poulenc's Concerto for Two Pianos, rare not only in its instrumentation, but in its conception and sound-world. French pianists Jean-Efflam and Andrea Bavouzet joined the orchestra, crammed onstage with a pair of Steinways.

Written in 1931, Poulenc, always adventurous, was under the spell of Balinese gamelan music and Mozart — two vastly different influences.

The gamelan shows up relentlessly, not only from the pianists themselves but in the orchestra's percussion section, including a pair of snappy castanets that found their way frequently into the score. Mozart came more as a flavor, especially in the easy middle movement, and in the cross-handed introduction that Jean-Efflam spun out as an intro to the finale.

The concerto is engaging and fun. After an orchestral entrance, the opening movement has a long cadenza right from the start for the soloist duo, Andrea carving out an ostinato figure, Jean-Efflam covering that with a gentle melody. Unique colors peppered the sound behind them.

The middle movement stayed melodic, the strings subdued, the focus on the soloists, the winds and the horns. The finale had a Hollywood, almost comic style (Poulenc probably had an after-

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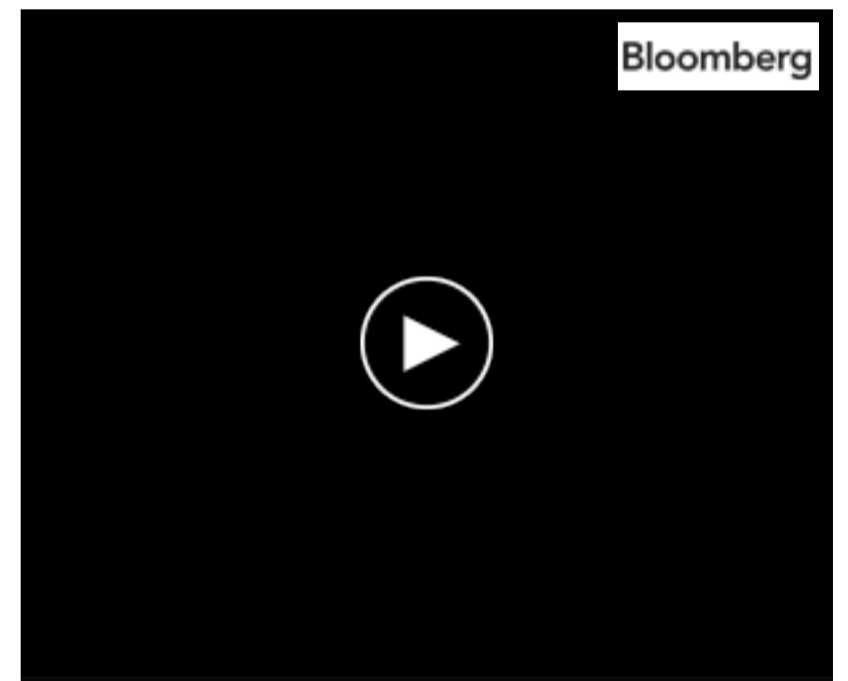
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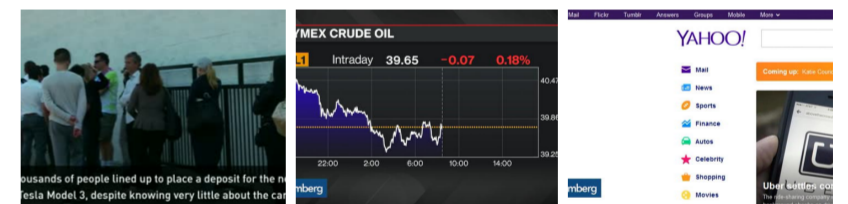
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hours Parisian nightclub in mind), introducing a vaudevillian texture.

The playing — an alert interplay between conductor, two soloists and orchestra, keen to the comic possibilities — brought the popular spirit of Poulenc alive.

Jean-Efflam returned alone for more serious work — much more serious — the Ravel Left-Hand Concerto. Written for a well-known concert pianist who had lost his right arm in World War I (Paul Wittgenstein), the concerto is no novelty piece, but a genuine virtuoso work that engages every instrument onstage — except the soloist’s right hand.

The work, played as one movement, opens ambiguously, in the lowest registers. A contrabassoon solo — it can hardly be called a melody, and in fact sounds as if the instrument is still tuning up — covered by an arpeggio in the basses, sets a dark mood. That mood crescendos, and the pianist finally enters, also in the deepest range of the instrument.

What follows can be summarized brusquely as two melodies, woven together with multiple rhythms, exploring that darkness. The completeness of the soloist’s efforts — it almost never sounds like one hand playing — is brought about by clever pedaling, and precise articulation in the left hand. Bavouzet’s fingering was engagingly accurate and clear.

The orchestra sounded secure and precise as well, especially in a martial section built around a descending set of triplets, which interrupted the mood, and led to a long, thoughtful cadenza.

The score does make the piano sound as if more than one hand is at play, but the music really is an appreciation of the left hand. Bavouzet strayed up the keyboard frequently, but the bulk of material remained in the lower registers — without apology. This performance of a concerto that has thankfully remained familiar to the repertory was memorable.

After intermission, a romantic favorite: Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony. There was much fine playing, punctuated by energetic horn solos (Nancy Hudgins), and by the ensemble in the unhinged waltz that opens the third movement. The strings, led aggressively by concertmaster Jesse Holstein, sounded uniformly lush and inspired.

The next NBSO performance is May 14, Maestro David MacKenzie’s final appearance with the orchestra that is celebrating its centennial. The program includes Bernstein’s “Chichester Psalms” and Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. For information and tickets visit www.nbsymphony.org or call the Z box office at 508-994-2900.

Keith Powers is an art and music writer who lives in Rockport.

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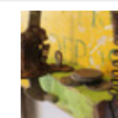
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