

Review: Stephen Hough delivers brilliant Liszt in rewarding VSO program

BY DAVID GORDON DUKE, SPECIAL TO THE SUN NOVEMBER 7, 2010



Stephen Hough gave a thrilling performance of Liszt's First Piano Concerto with the VSO on the weekend. He will repeat the performance Monday night at the Orpheum Theatre.

Photograph by: Handout, Handout

Hard as it is to believe that a program of Liszt, Tchaikovsky, and Saint-Saëns could be a remarkable evening of discoveries, that's exactly what Saturday's Masterworks Silver VSO program with British pianist Stephen Hough turned into: an object lesson in exceptional programming.

Bramwell Tovey began the concert with a tyro work by VSO composer-in-residence Scott Good, his *Prelude for Orchestra*, written just over a decade ago: in the composer's words, a "dark, but vibrant" exploration of big-orchestra effects, heavy on the brass.

Tchaikovsky's *Third Piano Concerto* received what may well have been its belated Vancouver premiere. This extravagant, emotional work is cast in a single movement, at its heart a bone-crushingly difficult solo cadenza. Hough is one of very few pianists prepared to tackle it and, if for no reason other than novelty, it was must-hear listening.

Camille Saint-Saëns's endearing *First Symphony*, a work heard only slightly more frequently than the Tchaikovsky concerto, ended the program. After a robust, Beethoven-inspired first movement, Saint-Saëns is fresh and beguiling in a central *March-Scherzo* and a coy *Adagio*. The symphony's grand fugal finale shows that the teenage composer picked up tricks from both Bach and Berlioz. What inventiveness and what craft — and what a shame that the safe and sensible tenets of conventional programming keep music like this from our regular concert diet!

The considerable joys of discovery notwithstanding, the trump card of the evening was Hough's take on Franz Liszt's familiar *First Piano Concerto*. Hough specializes in Liszt; his general approach is the antithesis of the smash-and-crash method that produces cheap and/or trivial results. Hough emphasizes Liszt's lyric writing, with a touch that immediately suggests *bel canto* at its best.

He keeps the tone sparkling and light for much of the work; then, when the febrile brilliance of the piece does take flame, the effect is dramatic, unconventional, and absolutely convincing. I'd go so far as to say that if you haven't heard this oft-maligned concerto in Hough's interpretation, you haven't heard the piece at all.

Program repeats Monday, 8 pm, Orpheum Theatre.