

Review: VSO ends season on high note

By David Gordon Duke

VANCOUVER - The Vancouver Symphony likes to end each season on a high note; a pairing of Tchaikovsky and Mahler Saturday at the Orpheum ensured a grand finale to this year's music making.

First off, though, was something new: Resonance Unfolding by VSO composer-in-residence Scott Good. Using the super-sized orchestrational complement assembled for Mahler's First Symphony, Good's work was a sure-footed (and often subdued) colour study for truly extravagant instrumental forces.

The orchestra's recording partnership with violinist James Ehnes has produced brilliant results, so this season's reunion of Ehnes, conductor Bramwell Tovey and the orchestra was much anticipated.

Even though Tchaikovsky's popular Violin Concerto is programmed on a regular-as-clockwork basis, we rarely hear performances of such shining quality. Ehnes has the technique, the tone, and the presence for the work. Add emotional generosity coupled with an infinitesimal dash of reticence, and his interpretation is both warm and tasteful.

His overall sound is focussed, sweet and refined. Lyrical passages breathe eloquently. And while there's plenty of fire and genuine brilliance, there's also precision and no grandstanding. Ehnes has long been in the forefront of younger violinists; it can now be said with complete confidence, that he is one of the leading artists of his generation.

Pairing Tchaikovsky with Mahler might have seemed a bit of Romantic overkill. Yet it couldn't have been more effective, as the most exuberant of the Mahler symphonies was given a richly engaging reading.

Bramwell Tovey put great emphasis on the First's quiet, attenuated opening—an enchanted pastorate that flavours the entire extended structure of the piece.

On Saturday the opening was intentionally unhurried, and relaxed casualness extended through much of the first movement. The second movement emphasized the heavy contrast between rustic and more sophisticated materials; the famous slow movement (with its mordant Frere Jacques parody) was exemplary.

Mahler's grandiose finale is the ultimate destination of the journey, but Tovey once again took time to savour the work's lyrical moments before the final blaze of glory brought the symphony, and the 2010/11 season, to a spectacular close. (Program repeats Monday, 8 pm).



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