

## Vancouver Symphony makes memorable music on Toronto stop

JOHN TERAUDS

CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's whirlwind four-day, four-city tour of central Canada made a memorable stop at Roy Thomson Hall on Saturday night. It had been 33 years since the British Columbians last played in Toronto.

Music director Bramwell Tovey, who returns to lead the Toronto Symphony's Proms concerts later this month, showed off a robust, disciplined ensemble that sounded at ease in a wide range of styles.

Along for the ride was 21-year-old piano protégé Avan Yu, who performed Sergei Rachmaninov's 1934 *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*.

Rachmaninov, a sensational pianist, decorated the keyboard score with technical hurdles that Yu surmounted without a hitch. His technique may have been flawless, but the execution was a bit bland next to the full-blooded orchestra. Tovey had so much fun highlighting the musical drama that he frequently drew attention away from his diligent soloist.

The conductor spent the rest of the evening treating an enthusiastic audience to the many shades and colours of orchestral playing, beginning with a delicate, transparent reading of Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*.

It was bookended by Dmitri Shostakovich's magnificent *Symphony No. 5*, which dates from 1937. Its four movements are a vast canvas for the composer's full musical palette. Rough, rat-a-tat militaristic shadows and pastel whispers of strings are underlined in masterful, complex counterpoint.

Tovey's interpretation erred on the side of intense insistence rather than eloquent persuasion but, then again, there was nothing subtle about the Stalin-era terror that is the backdrop for this music.

Also on the program was *The Linearity of Light*, a 2003 composition by Vancouver-based composer Jeffrey Ryan. Much darker than the title might imply, the 12-minute piece has an occasional point of interest. Its main strength was in highlighting a tight, virtuosic orchestra.

Let's hope the Vancouver Symphony can return again in this generation, not the next.