

Symphony tackles difficult program with panache

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A near-flawless performance marked the welcome return of principal conductor Martin Fischer-Dieskau to the Centre in the Square podium for masterpiece series concerts on Friday and Saturday.

The principal works on the program — the well-known Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini by Rachmaninov and the majestic 2nd Symphony of Sibelius — were prefaced by a relatively unknown work by Boris Blacher. Based on Paganini's capricious work for solo violin, Blacher's version was dazzling, full of whimsical humour, and displaying a mastery of orchestration and tone colour by the German composer who died in 1975.

That he was a man of the 20th century was evident in the blues and swing sequences in several variations,

the lush sound of the strings, the solo licks of various winds, occasional touches of Gershwin flavour — all in all a delightful surprise to hear and superbly played by the KWS.

Canadian pianist Andre Laplante joined Fischer-Dieskau and the KWS for the Rachmaninov Rhapsody based on the Paganini caprice, displaying a masterful technique and a thorough understanding of the various moods of the work.

Although called a rhapsody — and, indeed, the mood is rhapsodic — this piece is also a set of variations on the Paganini theme, and is considered by many to be Rachmaninov's masterpiece.

Laplante played with spectacular panache, full of style and character, his movements and facial expression exactly in sync with the mood changes, and delivering a performance that had the audience on its feet in thunderous appreciation for his remarkable abili-

ties.

The KWS was right on top of this work, playing with remarkable subtlety when in an accompanying role, yet singing out boldly when taking the lead. Only once, in the popular 18th variation, did the violins not have enough level when they took over the melodic line from the piano.

The major work on this remarkable but taxing program was the Sibelius 2nd Symphony, and this is so full of tempo changes and fragmented links that it is a nightmare for players and conductor.

Fischer-Dieskau and the KWS navigated the complex score with unbelievable style and accuracy, delivering a stunning performance, full of the majesty symbolizing the Finnish people's struggle for independence from the dominating Soviet Union.

This composition grows with unstoppable emotional logical power from a quiet pastoral opening to a ma-

jestic and unmistakable triumphant conclusion, and the orchestra rose to these demands with a style and understanding supported by the incredible abilities of its players.

Defying easy analysis, the first movement presents successive motifs, the throbbing string chords of the opening, the folksy woodwind counter-subject, the recitative for unaccompanied unison strings, the bold cadential figure from the winds then from the full orchestra — each of these, and the chord progressions and motifs between them, is dismantled, recombined, and then built towards the climax of the movement, stormy, then triumphant.

Then the movement is taken to pieces and the material restated in a new order, closing on the calm string chords with which it began.

The dark mood at the beginning of the tempo *andante* was skillfully handled by the low tympani roll and pizzi-

cato bass passage, moving through numerous tempo changes to a powerful and craggy brass climax, dramatically played by the KWS brass section.

The poignant nine repeated oboe B flats in the trio section of the *vivacissimo*, superbly played by Jim Mason, evokes folk music without quoting it, and after the second repeat a moving bridge passage builds into the great opening melody of the finale, full of flashing trumpet fanfares, and after a lamenting second subject the major key returns like a breath of fresh air and the music broadens to a majestic and exultant close.

This was the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony at its best and a triumphant return for Fischer-Dieskau, who, remarkably, conducted the whole program from memory.

Once again we are reminded of the blessings of having an orchestra and conductor like this in our midst.

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