

## KSO Ends an Emotional Season on a High Note

By Alan Sherrod

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Given recent sad events and important personnel changes, I wasn't necessarily expecting the final Masterworks concerts of the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra's 2010-11 season to be an exhilarating and euphoric experience, but that's exactly what happened last weekend. [Calvin Smith](#), the KSO's principal horn, died on Sunday, May 8, leaving the orchestra and management shocked and saddened, and with the task of finding a substitute (Radu Rusu of the Nashville Symphony) who could step into the demands of the horn-heavy scores of the all-Russian program at the last minute.

Adding to this intrigue was the decision to bring on the orchestra's newly-selected concertmaster, Gabriel Lefkowitz, for the final concert—a concert that would offer significant solo violin opportunities. In what can be seen as evidence of the organization's character, music director Lucas Richman and the orchestra rose to the occasion with a beautifully balanced, focused, and confident performance that built to a thrilling conclusion to its 75th-anniversary season.

Following his memorial remarks on Smith, Richman began the evening with Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic suite *Scheherazade*, Op. 35. The work, of course, is drawn in flavor and abstract narrative from the collection of Middle Eastern folk tales *The Thousand and One Nights*, in which the Sultan of Shahriar, feeling that all women are faithless, swears to put to death each one of his wives after the first night. Sultana Scheherazade saves her life by telling the Sultan intriguing stories night after night until he abandons his plan.

Although the opening orchestral entrances suggested some players were still feeling a bit verklempt, Lefkowitz immediately banished the concerns of both audience and his fellow players with stunning renderings of the violin solos that were beautifully poignant and plaintive in tone, simultaneously radiating total confidence and precision. That confidence seemed to soothe any remaining jangled nerves, allowing Richman to achieve a gorgeous balance of sonorities; the strings, in particular, displayed an ensemble togetherness that was velvety. As a whole, the orchestra responded crisply to Richman's dynamics amid the work's sometimes intricate rhythmic structure.

Pianist Joel Fan joined the orchestra on the second half of the program for Sergei Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini. Like many of his other works, Rachmaninoff wrote the set of variations to highlight his own skills as a piano soloist—he was the pianist for its premiere with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1934. Fan navigated the virtuosic minefield with daring, grace, and wonderful technique, without over-emotionalizing those melodic passages that have become synonymous with Rachmaninoff's 20th-century romanticism. Fan is also a master of rhythm as a storyteller as was evidenced by his encore piece, Piazzolla's "Flora's Game," the second of the *3 Preludes for Piano*.

Given the all-Russian romanticism of the evening, the concluding work was a natural—Stravinsky's 1919 version of his Suite from the *Firebird*, a ballet choreographed by Michel Fokine for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. The suite extracts moments from the ballet's fairy-tale narrative—one in which a bird with brilliant and magical plumage helps a hero banish an evil wizard.

The crisp yet fluid dynamic mastery that Richman and orchestra achieved in the Rachmaninoff was continued here. This was an orchestra now playing enjoyably and with a focused abandon. Woodwind textures appeared and faded, magical and mysterious, as part of the rich underpinnings that blared with brass and chattered with energetic percussion. Of course, the *Firebird's* finale is perfect for a season's end—

vibrant and with enough volume to induce at least a moment of euphoria. And just as the firebird in the story helped his hero break the spell of evil, so this *Firebird* replaced sadness with happy optimism for better things—and seasons—to come.

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