

Philharmonic leaves audience awed, fulfilled

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10:00pm

Although they premiered only 19 years apart, the contrast between Bela Bartok's "Concerto for Orchestra" and George Gershwin's "Concerto in F" -- the two works the Las Vegas Philharmonic performed Saturday -- is striking.

"Concerto for Orchestra" is Bartok's masterpiece and is considered one of the greatest orchestral works of the 20th century. Far from a precursor of death -- the composer was barely strong enough to walk from room to room when it was commissioned -- it is a harbinger of hope and even exhibits some humor.

It is also devilishly challenging. Most traditional concertos are structured in three movements and are composed for a solo instrument with orchestra. This one consists of five movements and there is no soloist. The entire orchestra is in the spotlight as the instruments are called upon individually and collectively throughout. While nearly all have their moments in the sun, it is the woodwinds that carry the heaviest load; the Philharmonic's were brilliant and merit special applause.

The opening movement begins with an eerie passage in the low strings that is reminiscent of Stravinsky's "Firebird." The movement alternates between delicacy and power. The orchestra exhibited extraordinary intensity, a quality it sustained through all five movements.

The second movement, a lighthearted, almost frisky romp, is subtitled "Game of the Pairs." Pairs of bassoons, oboes, clarinets and flutes led off in turn, followed by brasses in pairs. The contrasting middle section was solemn and hymnlike.

Bartok described the third movement as "a lugubrious death song." Movement four is built on folklike melodies, interrupted by a vicious burlesque of a snippet from a Shostokovich symphony that Bartok found particularly banal. Mockery accomplished, he introduced a melody in the strings that is best described as gorgeous.

The final movement is an assertion of life. Conductor David Itkin set an uncommonly fast tempo, but the orchestra was up to it. A concerto that had begun eerily had progressed to a hopeful and triumphant conclusion.

The Philharmonic's audience is not always enamored of 20th century music, but this audience knew they were experiencing something special. They sat in rapt and respectful silence as Itkin and his forces brought Bartok to life. Energy in the hall was palpable, and even casual concertgoers remarked that they were emotionally drained when the work ended.

Following intermission, the forces returned, together with enthusiastic and animated pianist Joel Fan, for Gershwin's "Concerto in F." Fan is yet another in a parade of exceptional young talent that music director David Itkin has been bringing to Las Vegas to solo with the Philharmonic.

Gershwin's greatest success stemmed from Broadway shows and a huge catalog of popular songs. The composer did not want to be type cast, but his effort was not successful since much of the "Concerto" reflects the same jazz-related rhythms and blues inflections as his "Rhapsody in Blue."

The first movement contains much material that could have done well as overtures to his Broadway shows. The second shows flashes of the later "An American in Paris" tempered by lovely lyrical passages. The final movement has been called an "orgy of rhythm."

Again, Itkin chose a blistering tempo that prevailed throughout. Many spots would have made outstanding film

scores had movies with sound not been a couple of years away.

There appeared to be a temporary lack of agreement on tempo between conductor and pianist early in the first movement, and Itkin's usual impeccable sense of balance seemed to desert him in spots where the orchestra covered the soloist -- at least from where we were seated.

Fan was called back for a well-deserved encore. He chose Liszt's "Fantasy de Rigoletto de Verdi," a concert paraphrase on the Quartet from Verdi's "Rigoletto." Fan's technique was absolutely dazzling. It was a romantic show-stopper that sent the audience home awed and fulfilled.

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