



Philharmonic shows poise in weekend aural safari

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By Joe Brown

Béla Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra has become a familiar staple for orchestras since it premiered in Boston in 1944, but it received its first Las Vegas airing 65 years later, at UNLV's Artemus Ham Hall on Saturday night.

The Las Vegas Philharmonic presented a confident doubleheader of concertos by 20th-century composers, with the most substantial sound and assured articulation this orchestra has demonstrated to date.

The Hungarian composer was gravely ill with undiagnosed leukemia when he was commissioned to create his final concerto. The commission reportedly revitalized and rallied Bartók, and the five movements take a tour of moods, moving from heavy-hearted grumbling in the first movement to hopefully humorous — some have read the finale as a victory over pain and pessimism.

The concerto is also a safari of unusual orchestral sounds, colors, textures and time signatures, with Bartok pairing bassoons, oboes and clarinets — and, amusingly, piccolo and timpani — plus a pair of full-size harps, diaphanously played by Kim DeLibero and Tara Ogden-Skouson.

Conductor David Itkin whipped up a wild and sometimes dissonant storm among the winds and murmuring strings, getting the orchestra all riled up, then calming it down before the lusty shout of a finale.

The Philharmonic was joined for George Gershwin's Concerto in F for Piano and Orchestra by New York-based pianist Joel Fan, who brought a crisp bite and precision to the piece's visually showy, technically difficult (and loud) hammering runs on the Steinway grand piano.

Within the first moments of the percussion and woodwind introduction of this concerto — even before that distinctive piano made its glissando entrance — just about anyone could name that composer. Gershwin's 1925 three-movement

concerto is more subdued and “serious” than its slightly older sibling, but you can easily recognize the family resemblance to “Rhapsody in Blue.”

Trumpeter Tom Wright’s solo — slow and bluesy with warm shades of “Summertime” — was picked up by clarinet and uplifted by hummingbird strings. First chair violinist DeAnn Letourneau also offered a gracefully soaring, spiraling solo.

Happiest of all, this concerto offered an opportunity for the orchestra’s percussion section — George Durkin, Pat Bowen, Bob Bonora, Rachel Julian and Joni DeClercq — to sparkle, particularly in the pell-mell third movement, which Gershwin decorated with bell tones, timpani, xylophone, wood blocks and a gong.

After the Gershwin, Fan and the Philharmonic were rewarded with three well-deserved curtain calls, and Fan treated the smiling, seated musicians to a brief, enchanting piece by Franz Liszt as solo encore, his hands a blur on the virtuosic ornamentations.