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MUSIC REVIEW | NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

Casting New Light on Russian Works

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

On paper, the two Russian works that Alan Gilbert conducted with the New York Philharmonic in an impressive concert on Thursday night at Avery Fisher Hall might seem unlikely choices to be included in programs for the orchestra's important tour of Europe, which begins on Jan. 17.

Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor can be a knockout if you have a soloist capable of dispatching its demonically difficult piano part. The Philharmonic had one — and how! — in Yefim Bronfman. Still, the work is ordinarily not an ideal vehicle to showcase an orchestra.

The riskier choice for the tour is Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2 in E minor. Though full of lush orchestral writing and alluring, long-spun melodies, this score of nearly an hour can come across as padded and aimless.

Not this time, however. Mr. Gilbert drew a revelatory performance from the Philharmonic. It had the requisite Russian Romantic soulful yearning, surging intensity and sumptuous sound. The astute musician in Mr. Gilbert was particularly on display here. He was determined, it seemed, to prove that this work made structural sense and had musical integrity.

After the 1908 premiere of this symphony in St. Petersburg, it became common practice for conductors to make cuts in the piece, sometimes sizable ones. Rachmaninoff was surprisingly compliant about the matter, though when he conducted the work, he usually did it complete.

So did Mr. Gilbert, in a performance that presented the music's expansiveness as a characteristic, not a flaw. In the slow introduction to the first movement, somber themes and motifs emerged haltingly, as if trying to coalesce into something solid. Yet Mr. Gilbert maintained such quiet tension that the quizzical music ensnared you. Almost without notice, the introduction evolved into the urgent episode that begins the teeming main Allegro section.

Throughout the vibrant Scherzo, the plaintive Adagio and the episodic and ultimately exuberant finale, Mr. Gilbert brought out musical resonances that linked Rachmaninoff as a harmonist to Debussy, Mahler and even early Schoenberg. The elegiac theme of the slow movement, which can sometimes seem endless, was lyrically compelling and deftly shaped, without ever sounding manipulated.

In the Prokofiev concerto, Mr. Bronfman displayed an eerily relaxed mastery of every pianistic challenge: the crazed first-movement cadenza; the whirlwind Scherzo with its nonstop rippling runs; the spiky, hard-driven

finale, with its keyboard-spanning leaps. His sound was steely in the aggressive outbursts yet tender in wistfully lyrical moments, like the middle of the slow movement, where a theme of folk-music simplicity appears. (He was equally sensitive in a solo encore, Schumann's poignant and gently rippling "Arabesque.")

The musicians seemed inspired to be performing this concerto with Mr. Bronfman, who is going with them to Europe. Historically, it has taken a lot for a conductor to impress these players. I hope they realize how great they are sounding these days under Mr. Gilbert.

On tour the orchestra will play music by John Adams, Magnus Lindberg, Schubert and others. Including these Russian pieces is surprisingly smart.

This program is repeated on Tuesday evening at Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center; (212) 721-6500, nyphil.org.

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