

REVIEW: Two visitors steal Nashville Symphony

show

By JONATHAN NEUFELD
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Two young prize-winning virtuosi stole the show at the Nashville Symphony's concert on Thursday night.

Were it not for the two young guns, I would have given the performance of the 1910 version of Stravinsky's "Firebird," complete with supertitles relating the Russian folk tale, a bit more ink. Conductor Asher Fisch drove the orchestra up to and occasionally beyond its boundaries. I'm not sure what one should do when a conductor's artistic vision seems to outstrip the ability to achieve it.

These problems almost fade into the background thanks first to Avner Dorman, a composer whose piece "Variations Without a Theme" started the evening off with a bang. The work combined relatively simple musical elements into a set of complex variations that, as Dorman mentioned in his comments before the performance, suggested the frenetic cultural variety and fullness of life in the Middle East.

The fourth variation was fascinating. It was sparsely orchestrated and rhythmically wicked as the flutes, clarinets, and percussion traded tiny bell-like passages. Time seemed to break down on a small scale as phrases were stretched to different lengths, while on a larger scale, the variation's pulse always drove forward. Erik Gratton, principle flute, played splendidly as he provided the connective tissue between nearly every variation.

The piece built to a sort of catastrophe in the ninth variation where the orchestra crescendoed to an explosion followed by a slow downward glissando by the strings. The following two variations recapped a number of musical elements that went before, but now, after the catastrophe of the 9th (of 11) variation, they sounded more driven. Local rhythms became more insistent making each recapitulated musical element more focused, though each was played now with many others. Along with Gabriela Lena Frank's piece from January, it's one of the most compelling new works I've heard this year.

The second virtuoso was Alexander Kobrin, Gold medal winner of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. He effortlessly generated a wide variety of tone colors and paid exquisite attention to the tiniest of phrasing details in Tchaikovsky's war horse, the B-flat minor concerto.

It's unfortunate that Fisch and the orchestra matched neither the articulation nor the color and phrasing of Kobrin's piano. He had a much livelier reading of the piece than the orchestra gave. While the mismatch was occasionally annoying, Kobrin's shining playing more than made up for it.

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If you go

WHAT: Nashville Symphony Orchestra's SunTrust Classical Series, featuring Van Cliburn Winner Alexander Kobrin

WHEN: 8 p.m. today and Saturday

WHERE: Schermerhorn Symphony Center

COST: \$30-\$100 for Friday's show, Saturday's show is sold out.

DETAILS:
www.nashvillesymphony.org