

Chicago Symphony Orchestra captures the intense spirit of Shostakovich concerto

By Kyle Macmillan For Sun-Times Media December 6, 2013 11:00AM

Bitterness, anger and anguish. These emotions and more roiled through the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's searing, enthralling performance Thursday evening of Dmitri Shostakovich's "Violin Concerto No. in A minor, Op. 77."

Written in 1947-48 in Soviet Russia during heightened artistic oppression under Stalin, it is an oddly structured, uncomfortable work. Yet that that very disjointedness gives the concerto its extraordinary power, because it springs from the ugly truth of its time.

The piece, which the composer kept under wraps until 1955, served as the emotional heart and soul of a well-meshed, interrelated program of three works that all contained moments of wild abandon and showed off the orchestra in rich ways.

Though it is possible to envision an interpretation that pushed the intensity even closer to the breaking point, guest conductor Stéphane Denève's incisive, well-conceived take delivered the punch in the gut Shostakovich surely intended.

The dependable Canadian violinist James Ehnes turned in an impassioned solo turn, capturing the concerto's unruly intensity and smartly negotiating its ever-contrasting moods. He dug into the grit of this work, drawing an appropriately empty, washed-out tone from his instrument that ideally suited parts of the first movement "Nocturne" — an unsettled night with a dank pall hanging overhead.

Denève and Ehnes captured the manic spirit of the Scherzo, which felt constantly like it was about to spin out of control, with disorienting syncopations and jarring intrusions, such as a snatch of surreal Calliope-like music.

The third movement "Passacaglia" gave way to an extended cadenza, which Ehnes made his own, starting quietly and then letting all the pent-up tension spew forward in a tumult of agitated introspection. The work culminated with a bizarrely macabre Burlesque that reached a suitably fevered pitch.

As a well-deserved encore, Ehnes offered an ideal antidote to the frenzied concerto — a clear, eloquent version of the third movement of Johann Sebastian Bach's "Sonata No. 3 in C major."

The orchestra has no doubt performed Hector Berlioz's "Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14," dozens if not hundreds of times, but Denève made sure this version of the much-loved staple did not get lost among the rest. Displaying a keen rapport with the musicians, he led a fresh, involving performance, bubbling with the élan and effervescence one could expect of a French conductor.

The work is meant to be a showcase of the orchestra, and it was, with highlights aplenty, such as the intoxicating waltz in the second movement, "A Ball," with four harps divided into two pairs on each side of the stage for an appealing stereophonic effect, or the sinister, frenzied fun of the final section, "Dream of a Witches' Sabbath." There was also no shortage of individual efforts worth noting, including a strong English horn solo by Scott Hostetler at the beginning of the third movement.

The evening opened with a boisterous version of Carl Maria von Weber's "The Ruler of the Spirits" Overture, Op. 27 — the orchestra's first-ever subscription concert performance of the compact piece.

NOTE: It is only the Dec. 10 performance for which the cello concerto is being substituted. See below.
