

A Bi-Polar Celebration

New York

Isaac Stern Auditorium, Carnegie Hall

03/01/2011 -

Hector Berlioz: *Overture to Béatrice et Bénédict*

James MacMillan: *Violin Concerto* (NY Premiere)

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: *Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Opus 64*

Vadim Repin (Violin)

The Philadelphia Orchestra, Charles Dutoit (Chief Conductor)



V. Repin

Charles Dutoit brought his Philadelphia Orchestra to Carnegie Hall for a bi-polar celebration. The first half was fresh, electric, frequently deliriously happy, rhythmic and pulsing along like an extravagant party. The second half started with the entrance of a grouchy old man sitting down at the party and droning, “While you’re having a good time, oy!, have I got problems, Lemme tell you about them...”

Anyhow, once upon a time (the time being 8 pm last night), Charles Dutoit and his orchestra performed what must be an instinctive joy for him, Berlioz’ frothy overture to a comedy which could have been written by Neil Simon, Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. Berlioz excised the cartoonish villains, retained *Beatrice and Benedict*, so they could throw insult after insult for two hours of slapstick fun.

The eight-minute overture seemed shorter, despite Mr. Dutoit prolonging the love theme. That, though, simply made the froth, the Elizabethan meringue all the lighter. Best, the Philadelphia Orchestra strings still have that sheen instilled in them by Ormandy and Stokowski.

How could anything surpass the Berlioz? A most unlikely personality. James MacMillan, 51, is a successful composer little heard in America (though he is conducting his own program later this month). A Scotsman with an abiding love for “the timeless truths of Roman Catholicism”. A devotee of two other religious composers, Messiaen and Arvo Pärt, he has interests in music of the Far East and Central Europe. As his *Violin Concerto* was in memory of his mother, one hardly expected a Berlioz-style delight.



J. MacMillan (© Carnegie Hall)

Yet from the first notes, soloist Vadim Repin played a fervent, exciting, strange, virtual three-movement perpetual motion of string gymnastics. For the first movement, “Dance”, Mr. Repin was ferocious, fierce, never once taking his bow off the strings. It was not a robotic cadenza, but a work of personal energy, emotion, vying with the large orchestra, exploding with rhythmic *sforzandi*. We were breathless, Mr. Repin seemed perfectly cool.

The second movement, “Song”, was suitably reverent, but never morbid, rising up to a Barber-like crescendo and climax that actually worked.

The final movement was suitably pyrotechnical, but was filled with enigmas, beginning when the players recited German digits (“Eins! Drei!...”) followed later by a Third-Reich-style march. Mr. MacMillan obviously adores orchestral eccentricity, and his effects were as puzzling as they were beautiful. Piano and piccolo together, the violin singing in the upper ranges while the brass growled or barked in their lowest ranges. Myriads of rhythms (the movement is called “Song And Dance”), and further explosive punctuation from the Philadelphia Orchestra.

More than a *tour de force*, this was a celebration of violin playing itself. With Mr. MacMillan, the words “dour Scotsman” are obviously a grievous error.

A breath of fresh air in the intermission, and then...well into the party came aforesaid grouchy old man.

The opening clarinet theme in Tchaikovsky’s *Fifth Symphony* was a shock, a recognition that ever-petulant Pyotr had his problems. After three minutes, though, the shock from the reality of tragedy wore off, and one could listen to Charles Dutoit at his best. Aided by a splendid horn player and equally splendid phrasing in the *Andante*, and by an overwhelming series of climaxes for the climax, Mr. Dutoit turned the *Fifth* into a work not exactly into Berlioz-style joy, but music with passion and sometimes even glory.

Harry Rolnick