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Dutoit leads Tchaikovsky, MacMillan premiere



By Peter Dobrin

Inquirer Classical Music Critic

No schadenfreude intended, but it's hard not to notice that the Philadelphia Orchestra's podium decision dismissed by some critics a few years ago as a caretaker move is turning out to be both prescient and wise. The orchestras of Boston and Chicago may have generated high levels of excitement in those cities and beyond by choosing James Levine and Riccardo Muti, respectively, and yet here in Philadelphia we have a chief conductor who is a living, growing artistic force. And who actually shows up for work.

Charles Dutoit jolts expectations in his current Verizon Hall program, to be repeated Saturday night. The U.S. premiere of the James MacMillan *Violin Concerto* looked like it would be the news Thursday evening, and although it turned out to be an intriguing (if unfocused) work, the big statement was Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 5*.

The surprise was that Dutoit far exceeded his typically high standard to shape an interpretation exceptional in drama and sense of rightness. It wasn't revelatory (nor was the Berlioz *Overture to Beatrice and Benedict*), or taken apart and put back together the way Vladimir Jurowski did with, say, the same composer's *Manfred Symphony*. But it was a crystallization - of Dutoit's intuition for how phrasing and pacing translate into emotion, and his sensitivities to the deep string resonance that sets this orchestra apart from others.

The second movement was extremely moving. Dutoit was liberal with flexibility in tempos, though nothing came across as fussiness. Principal hornist Jennifer Montone played like a dream. Whether through specific suggestions or a general comfort level, Dutoit must have had something to do with the way Montone phrased. The gorgeous tone, though, was all hers. The double basses had a particularly rich presence here, adding to the phenomenon that when things are going right they tend to snowball.

Scottish composer MacMillan, 51, wrote his *Violin Concerto* on a joint commission from four orchestras, including Philadelphia (with local support from the Annenberg and Neubauer foundations). So many of Thursday's successes had to do with the soloist, Vadim Repin, that it's hard to separate player from piece. The violinist is often running. Furiously fast passagework has to rise above ear-catching orchestrations, and in this Repin triumphed. He also found great beauty amid the grotesqueries of the second movement, a slow dance. When the lower brass growls, the violin is otherwise engaged in a high-wire act of spiritualism. The effect is striking. So are many other moments. An extended piccolo and piano section is pretty, the brass writing often diabolic and edgy.

What it all adds up to - what point the skillful orchestrations are in service of - is less clear. The fact that MacMillan can't explain the meaning of spoken German words in the third movement ("Eins, zwei, drei, vier - Meine Mutter, tanz mit mir") is significant. For some composers, how sound hits the ear is enough.

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