

Concert review:

Cupid's arrow strikes RPO

Stuart Low, Staff writer

(February 17, 2007) — Local music lovers eavesdropped on music's star-crossed lovers, as the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra unwrapped a Valentine's Day package of Romantic showpieces.

Thursday's program spelled "sweetheart" in Russian, English and German: Romeo and Juliet in Tchaikovsky's Overture — Fantasy, Tristan and Isolde in Wagner's Prelude und Liebestod, and Ruslan and Ludmilla in Glinka's overture by the same name. Love doesn't come easily to these couples, and their back-to-back romances made for a heady night.

But the concert's centerpiece was a commanding performance of Elgar's Cello Concerto by Steven Doane, a professor at the Eastman School of Music.

Thanks to the late British cellist Jacqueline du Pre, this brooding work has become a staple of the repertoire, a favorite of Yo-Yo Ma and Lynn Harrell, among others. Reflecting Elgar's rage at the carnage of World War I, it demands all-out commitment from both soloist and orchestra.

Doane's somber eloquence and darkly burnished tone contrasted with du Pre's near-hysterical urgency. His expressive bow arm — one of the best in the business — dispatched Elgar's gusts of anguish to the back rows of the Eastman Theatre. The RPO's accompaniment under conductor Christopher Seaman was exemplary in all but the final movement.

The evening began with Ruslan and Ludmilla,



a Pushkin fairy tale that may not be familiar to Rochester concertgoers.

Suffice to say that the knight Ruslan is mightily upset when his new bride, Ludmilla, vanishes from their marriage bed in a burst of thunder. (Don't you hate it when that happens?)

He must battle a giant head and an invincible beard to get her back. But the RPO's full-blooded, boisterous performance left little doubt that the bridal bed would heat up again.

Seaman brought a real sense of persecution and pulsing ardor to Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet.

And the sumptuous, beautifully paced Tristan und Isolde selections could have been recorded on the spot.

But it's an open question whether Wagner's long, searching lines can still touch listeners in an age of short attention spans and instant gratification. And with all the sniffles and sneezes in Thursday's audience, it should have been retitled *Dristan und Gesundheit*.

An unusual number of under-40 listeners attended the concert — perhaps lured by the promise of romance.