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REVIEW

Buffalo Philharmonic gives memorable concert at Kravis

By Ken Keaton

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Every so often, it all comes together — great repertory with magnificent performances by conductor, orchestra and soloist — to produce a truly memorable concert experience. That was what the fortunate audience at the Kravis Center heard Sunday night.

The repertory? Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*, arguably the greatest symphony ever composed and certainly the most famous. Add **Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 3***, among the greatest piano concertos. The performers? The Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by JoAnn Falletta, with **Philippe Bianconi** on piano. **The performances? Glorious, thrilling, at once subtle and magnificent; an experience this reviewer will never forget.**

Rarely has an orchestra sounded so purely beautiful in sound, balance and clarity. Falletta, who has been at the helm of that band for nearly 15 years, has beyond a solid regional presence and, with recordings and tours, turned it into a truly international one.

The Beethoven symphony — so well-known that it is actually rarely heard in concert — was played in the first half. The opening movement was not as tortured as it is often heard but was performed as if the outcome of the battle was never in doubt, as inexorable forces moved toward the inevitable. Falletta's performance reminded me of Bruno Walter, always warm no matter how much conflict was in the music. The second movement, an island of rest in the titanic battle, was never played with so much pure beauty of sound.

Then the battle was rejoined in the third movement. The resolve against the menace was focused. The quiet return of the first section felt like a covered pot coming to a boil, ready to explode at any moment. And explode it did, with the sheer, triumphant glory of the finale. We heard a performance of this work that could stand by the greatest ever heard.

The Rachmaninoff piece, one of the towering Romantic masterworks, requires a pianist of both subtlety and steel, intellect and passion — and an orchestra and conductor with lush, rich sounds that never become muddy. Bianconi, Falletta and the Buffalo Philharmonic had all this and more.

Bianconi shaped the achingly beautiful opening theme with care. His rich playing always had enough Gallic clarity that he was not hiding behind the pedal. The climax of the first movement thrilled to the bone, and in the cadenza, he became a primal being, arising from the Earth. It was overwhelming.

The second movement belongs to the piano, and Bianconi traversed the shifting moods perfectly. The finale was all blazing flame, with the orchestra more of an equal, ultra-romantic partner. It was a performance for the ages, sweetened by an unidentified encore of exquisite simplicity.

- See more at: <http://m.palmbeachdailynews.com/news/news/local/buffalo-philharmonic-gives-memorable-concert-at-kr/ndJ5h/#sthash.msYRnpX5.dpuf>