

THE BLADE

One of America's Great Newspapers

Saturday, September 21, 2013

Toledo Symphony offers moving performance to start 70th season

BY SALLY VALLONGO
SPECIAL TO THE BLADE

There was dancing in the Peristyle again last night. But not in the aisles. Let folks swing and step to Trombone Shorty, as they did earlier this week. Some music seems to need that. But when the Toledo Symphony opened its 70th season with Rachmaninoff, there was simply so much going on for ear, brain, and heart that no body needed to move a muscle.

The orchestra and **Stefan Sanderling** dug deep to bring out all the inherent excitement of the first number, Symphonic Dances. Structurally spanning the gap between suite and symphony, this late work is packed with color and contrasting texture, dripping with beautiful melodies. Solos sparkled in the first movement — Shannon Ford's dulcet saxophone, Kevin Schempf's rich bass clarinet, Valrie Kantorski's rippling piano. In the second movement, a waltz, Concertmaster Kirk Toth negotiated a tricky series of solo entries, introducing what became swirling and romantic banners of sound. The final movement was series of contrasting sections changing tempo and color in a flash. Sanderling was in peak form, pushing and pulling tempi and dynamics to shape the music the way a sculptor controls clay.

Still, the best lay just ahead, after intermission: Rachmaninoff's most fearsome yet stunning Piano Concerto No. 3, with Philippe Bianconi at the Orser Steinway in his Toledo Symphony debut. If somewhat unassuming seated at the keyboard before the downbeat, Bianconi asserted himself immediately, rippling out the haunting opening theme with Gallic panache and certitude. It soon became clear this soloist would leave a giant musical footprint on this Rach-fest evening. Once again, Toledo Symphony principals strutted their musical stuff: oboist Kim Loch, clarinetist Georg Klaas, flutist Joel Tse, French horn Sandra Clark, and bassoonist Gareth Thomas proved perfect partners with Bianconi in their turn. Communication between soloist and maestro was intense and confident, with musical transitions and tempo shifts navigated extraordinarily well. The orchestra provided sensitive and savvy accompaniment to the complex piano part. What's better than a blazing start to a concerto like this? Well, only an even more brilliant conclusion. And that, finally, had the audience up and roaring, clapping, and, yes, dancing in the aisles.

Contact Sally Vallongo at: svallongo@theblade.com.