

RIDGEFIELD SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA – Saturday, October 3, 2015

Reviewed by Courtenay Caublé

Although seemingly an anomaly on a program labeled “Romantic Russians”, Felix Mendelssohn’s unquestionably romantic Piano Concerto No. 1 in G minor, played by pianist Jason Hardink, Maestro Gerald Steichen’s guest soloist at last Saturday evening’s season opener at the Ridgefield High School auditorium, proved to be both musically companionable and exciting as a centerpiece between two equally romantic Russian works, Alexander Borodin’s Polovetsian Dances from *Prince Igor* and Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 4 in F minor.

Borodin’s Polovetsian Dances, replete on stage with chorus and dancers during a performance of *Prince Igor*, has fared for generations as a favorite concert piece for orchestra alone. Its seductive orientalism and whirling rhythms can fire the imagination even without the choral voices and visual stimulation of whirling dancers. Steichen and his musicians did full justice to the music’s colorful combination of energetic rhythmical cadences and beguilingly orient-flavored lyricism, with particular kudos for percussion, solo woodwind voices, and brass.

The myriad moods of Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony were similarly well communicated Saturday evening, with sensitive understanding and control from the podium and responsive performances from orchestral sections, individual solo players, and the full orchestra. The oboe solo that begins the second movement was soulfully expressive, the brass were impressively full-voiced, and contrasts between folk melodies and onrushing orchestral energy, especially in the last movement, were both clearly defined and integrated.

Only twenty-three years old at the time and inspired by a sudden strong infatuation with a young aristocratic girl in Munich, Mendelssohn essentially composed his first piano concerto in a matter of days. He must have been thinking of her especially when he was conceiving the concerto’s richly romantic second movement, with its flow of expressive melody, which pianist Jason Hardink communicated with fluent warmth, shaping and phrasing his solo passages with sensitive attention to nuances and fine control of tone and dynamic shadings.

While also lyrically expressive, the impassioned first movement, and to an even greater extent, the enthusiastic rondo finale abound in virtuosic display. Pianist Hardink was as much at home with that as with the warm lyrical flow of the middle movement. In addition to being a wonderfully rich and enjoyable piece of music, Mendelssohn’s first concerto could qualify as a challenging test for both a pianist’s musical sensitivity and his (or her) virtuosity. Pianist Jason Hardink scored very high on both counts Saturday evening.