

Civic Orchestra tackles Shostakovich with gusto

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Times Colonist staff

"To play music in Moscow ... was more than a joy. The orchestra and the public were... enthusiastic and full of vital energy."

The conductor Bruno Walter made his first visit to Moscow and Leningrad (St. Petersburg as it had

once been and would one day be again) in 1926, at a time when Lenin's Soviet Union was particularly welcoming to Western artists. It was during this visit that Walter met the 20-year-old

Dmitri Shostakovich, who played his First Symphony at the piano for the conductor.

Walter was impressed and promised to conduct the work in Berlin; that performance, in 1927, set the seal on Shostakovich's international reputation.

The Civic Orchestra and George Corwin closed Saturday's concert with a dashing performance of the symphony, which might well be the most technically difficult music they have ever essayed. However, from the colourful trumpet and winds of the opening to the exciting final coda, it was a genuine performance, not simply a playing of the notes.

One of the more impressive aspects of the performance was its dynamic range, which included a fortissimo which was very (very) loud without being harsh. Perhaps the most spectacular example was the huge climax in the slow movement, cut off abruptly as if by an axe. In the deafening silence which ensued, I heard a voice whisper a mild oath — and mentally nodded my head.

Dmitri Kabalevsky was, in some ways, the polar opposite of Shostakovich. Certainly, he never ran afoul of the authorities, never — presumably — dreaded the knock on the door in the small hours. There are certain stylistic similarities: Kabalevsky's music often sounds like something Shostakovich might have knocked off had he not had the Stalinist Sword of Damocles hanging over his head.

It would be a mistake, though, to dismiss Kabalevsky's music as nothing more than "shallow showpiece" — as I did, rather hastily, in a review of a performance of the finale of his Violin Concerto, this summer. I should have known better: Many a fine concerto has a lightweight finale.

Jordan Ofiesh certainly has the measure of Kabalevsky's concerto — composed in 1948 and dedicated to "Soviet Youth" — as was evident from his first, confident entry.

Ofiesh made light of the work's technical demands, which are not in themselves light, and produced a fine, singing tone. His playing of the finale's cadenza also revealed a musician of excellent dramatic instincts.

Throughout the concerto, the orchestra provided first-rate support, never distracting the attention away from the soloist's wilder flights of fancy. The ensemble — as witness the whiplash chords which interrupt the aforementioned cadenza — was generally superb.

No composer in history has focused so exclusively on a single instrument as did Chopin on the piano. Moreover, as many a pianist will tell you, his music is more ultimately "pianistic" than perhaps anyone else's.

It might seem, then, that Alexander Glazunov was backing a loser when he orchestrated four of Chopin's piano pieces. It is a measure of his success — and, indeed, of the Civic's playing — that there were few moments in the *Chopiniana Suite* where I felt the urgent need of a piano.

The evening opened with the overture to Borodin's *Prince Igor*, whose sombre introduction soon gave way to an exciting, but not overbearing allegro, by way of a finely controlled *accelerando*.

Collectively, the Civic's musicians are undoubtedly playing better than ever; at some point in the last few years they have crossed the line which separates the ensemble of enthusiastic amateurs from the real orchestra. Corwin must take a good deal of the credit for this, but so must his musicians, whose dedicated work week after week is most definitely paying off.

REVIEW

Who: Civic Orchestra of
Victoria

Jordan Ofiesh, violin
George Corwin, conductor