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Gluzman conquers Glazunov; Symphony Tacoma works Dvorák



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Virtuosity and familiarity made a winning combination in the Pantages Theater Saturday night, as Symphony Tacoma opened the new season with its first concert under a new name. While the orchestra gave solid performances of favorites like Borodin’s “Polovtsian Dances” (the chorus less so) and Dvorák’s “New World” symphony, violin soloist Vadim Gluzman was the stunning centerpiece.

Things began less than perfectly with the Borodin. Although it’s marvelous (and unusual) to hear these familiar dances with voices singing the original operatic chorus, the acoustic problems of the Pantages and Symphony Tacoma Voices weren’t quite solved by amplification. Volume was still weak, except for the altos; entries were late and slow and the speakers just magnified tenor tone issues.

Yet, there were some lovely moments: the lilting oboe of the Dance of the Young Girls (a.k.a. “Stranger in Paradise”), a war-like drive for the General Dance, feathery violin ricochets and snare for Dance of the Female Slaves and an exciting finish that left director Sarah Ioannides breathless to introduce the next piece.

Gluzman, however, was enough to wake up anybody. First hurtling through the string crossings of Arvo Pärt’s “Fratres” with bell-like clarity, then gliding through the arpeggios with the lyricism of Bach, Gluzman proved that he’s not just a concerto showman. Underneath his fierce musicality the orchestra held a tranquil blanket of sound.

But it was Glazunov’s Violin Concerto in A minor that let the Soviet-born Israeli violinist show his stuff. A lush, romantic tone combined with a subtle palm court-style that perfectly suited the 19th-century Russian composer who spent so much time picking up the latest in France and America. And the playfulness of Gluzman’s portamenti and rubato made a perfect foil for his crystal-clear runs, astonishing double-stop tremoli and that bird-like tone that emerged from high up on the Stradivarius’ E string.

The orchestra, meanwhile, mostly kept up with Ioannides who was sensitive to Gluzman’s every move. A gutsy viola theme showed the sense of placing that section on the outside of the stage. And in the final movement Gluzman ran through every violin trick in Glazunov’s book (spiccato double-stops, harmonics, pizzicato chords, left-hand pizzicato runs) with a flourish that earned him a standing ovation before he’d even finished the last note.

The concert’s anchor, however, was the “New World” symphony — a warhorse, but Ioannides’ first rendition with Symphony Tacoma and fitting the Eastern European program like a cloak. Conducting entirely from memory, Ioannides gave great attention to detail (ends of phrases, brass nuance) and brought some new sounds to this so-familiar work (a slight pause, an acceleration) that made sense of the theme transitions. Yet, she was kind, constantly encouraging the horns and letting the woodwind choruses handle their own cathedral-like passages.

And the orchestra responded. Achieving a big sound despite the hall’s dryness (thanks mostly to rich lower strings) they put heart and soul into those familiar tunes: a cor anglais as tranquil as a river in the second movement, sharp timpani bringing order in a somewhat messy third movement, a stronger cello sound (thank goodness!) courtesy of new principal Jake Saunders and assistant Karen Schulz-Harmon. A rough first violin sound evened out by the second movement.

Finally, the famous rising-falling theme of the fourth movement came with drama and pulse, Ioannides asking for waves rather than a wall of sound, and a final woodwind chord that seemed to stretch to infinity. Ioannides is demanding more and more of Tacoma’s orchestra – and for the most part, they’re working hard to give it to her. It promises to be a good season.