

N.J. Symphony Orchestra gives near perfect concert performance

Concert Review

By **ROBERT W. BUTTS**
Contributing Writer

If one were to ask musicians and listeners who was the first composer they actually loved, many would say "Tchaikovsky." Later on, most come to appreciate Beethoven, Mozart, Bach and others, but Tchaikovsky is often the first.

The reasons, at least the surface reasons, are easy to understand. His music is melodious, rhythmically stirring and orchestrally vibrant. His scores are quickly grasped and taken to heart. But is this solely due to lyrical and aesthetic ease? Hearing the violin concerto performed by 16-year-old Sharon Roffman and the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra on Saturday, Jan. 14 at the continuously more rejuvenated Community Theater in Morristown, one couldn't help but view Tchaikovsky's enormous popularity — especially his ranking as a first love — with new understanding.

First, however, before going any further, it needs to be stated that this was as close to a perfect performance as one ever finds. If the concert had ended after the first movement, the evening would

have been well worth the cost of admission, as the overflowing crowd acknowledged.

The orchestra was inspired from the opening awakening calls and played throughout the evening with passion and involvement. Maestro Zdenek Macak had an extraordinarily "on" night, igniting the stage with his animated style and interpretive perception. But, from the start, it was Roffman who most captured the audience, maneuvering through a score once considered far too difficult and confusing for anyone to play as if the music sprang forth from inside herself rather than from the page.

And there, for this reviewer, was the key to reunderstanding one's relationship with Tchaikovsky. Perhaps due to the suppression of his own sexuality, the Russian composer lived a life of soul-searching intensity. He revealed his hurts, desires, dreams and questions through his music, as though in each motive he found expression for his awareness and his own physical and emotional self. Through his composition, he sought to call attention to his being, to share it, and to realize it fully. In a sense, is this not the essence of adolescence? How can any teen-ager sensitive to the awareness of his or her own human uniqueness during the shift from child to young adult not respond to the composer most uninhibitively exploring those moments of self-discovery?

While it could be quibbled that Roffman's youth meant a de-emphasis of the tragic undertones

and heart-rending emotionality, it could not be denied that her very youthfulness allowed her to interpret the music in ways that allowed us to re-see Tchaikovsky as we did when we first discovered him.

In many ways, as Roffman demonstrated, this concerto is about storytelling. The violinist doesn't compete with the orchestra nor does she experience some metaphysical transformation that unites all in artistic thought. Nor does the work concentrate merely on superficially grandiose aural artifact. Rather, the musicians gather to hear the violinist tell her tale.

Insightful

In fact, the first movement seemed similar to the opening of "Pagliacci" with the musicians playing the townspeople and Roffman playing all the roles. Carefully and insightfully, she and Macak let the story unfold at a perfect pace, with a clear beginning, middle, climax and denouement. In addition to the discovery of those things that make her her, Roffman also showed herself as a performer and the performer as Tchaikovsky's protagonist becoming more and more aware of the poser of good storytelling.

Gradually, she transformed the piece from one of captivating narration to one of brilliant personal involvement. Phrases more passionately exploded from her fingers. Rhythms grew more supple in tune with the flow of events and ideas. By the time she reached the cadenza, she'd swept the entire theater into her world, into her story and into her growing self-awareness. Flawlessly, she rippled through the arpeggios. Crisply, she forced triple-stops to resound. Effectively, she hit her high notes and harmonics reached into every heart and soul until she and Tchaikovsky reveled in the beauty that is music and that is the human self.

Audience Appreciation

Fittingly, the audience broke every rule of concert etiquette and roared its approval with waves of applause before the last notes of the opening movement that stopped resonating. But how could one not clap at that point? This was magic of a very special, very treasured variety. This was the music of life, love and youth.

And first love.

To the thrill of everyone present, there was certainly more than a single movement. The rest of the Tchaikovsky was equally well done, played brilliantly by soloist and orchestra alike. The other major work on the program, Beethoven's "Symphony No. 6, Pastoral" created a different yet somewhat related mood. While Tchaikovsky

celebrated the discovery of the human self, Beethoven celebrated the wonder of being humanly alive. Again, the first movement was the most moving as the composer opened up a world in which our dreams and fantasies are realized. Like with Tchaikovsky, this is music that opens ourselves to ourselves, letting us see the world in warm human colors. Despite the work's descriptive title and the names of individual movements Beethoven's work is not merely an evocation of the natural environment. It is the pleasure and joy on getting knowing one's alive and a part of that wonderful environment.