

Rostropovich concert worth the trip

By Avigdor Zaromp
special writer

This last week presented a couple of rare opportunities to attend truly superb musical performances. One of these was a recital by the master cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich, at the Wharton Center of Performing Arts, on the campus of Michigan State University in East Lansing. The additional traveling distance was a small inconvenience in comparison to the awesome experience.

Rostropovich was accompanied on the piano by Victoria Bogdashevskaya, principal keyboard player with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra. The enormous and enthusiastic crowd for the event was larger than most musical events in our area manage to attract.

On the program were works by Marcello, Schumann, Brahms, Rachmaninoff and Shostakovich.

The opening work, the Adagio from the Oboe Concerto by Alessandro Mar-

cello (1869-1947) was the least familiar item and possibly the least profound. However, the superbly crafted sound produced by Rostropovich was a welcome indication of the better things to come.

THIS WAS followed by three charming pieces by Schumann, from his "Festliche Stucke in Violon." These completed the emotional preparation for one of the major selections, the Cello Sonata No. 2 in F Major by Brahms. This is the most frequently played work among Brahms' three cello sonatas.

While I have heard many adequate performances of this work in the past, this performance was by far the most convincing one with respect to the cello role.

This was a rare occasion in which the pulsating pizzicatos in the slow movement were more than an artificial sound effect. The last movement was mesmerizing with its shivery theme. Bogdashevskaya proved to be a ca-

pable pianist, with good technique and control. However, she seemed to be intimidated by the superior prestige of Rostropovich. The Brahms sonata designates almost equally significant roles to both instruments.

THE ROLE of the piano is far more than mere accompaniment. While this was made clear in some respects, there were instances in which the piano was too timid.

For example, the crescendo in the trio part of the scherzo could have been more pronounced and turbulent. There should have been also some more assertion in the last movement.

In the second part, the soothing strains of "Vocalise" by Rachmaninoff served as a warm up for the second major selection -- the Shostakovich Sonata for Piano and Cello in D Minor.

This sonata, in my opinion, is one of the most profound chamber works of

this century. For Rostropovich it also has a great personal significance. He was a personal friend of the composer and had recorded it with the composer at the piano, some 35 years ago.

AFTER THE concert he said that this was the only recording of the work he had ever made or that he ever intends to make, due to the special and unique feelings involved.

The work has its share of technical difficulties. However, the slow movement poses the most formidable musical challenges.

With its dissonant passages, only an inspired performance can make the difference between the sound of a masterpiece and a formless, meaningless collection of notes. The quality of the music in this movement in this performance is of the kind that one is unlikely to encounter in the near future.

I found the tempo in the final move-



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ment somewhat too rushed. This is a movement with profound humor, some of which seems to be most convincing in a deliberately slow statement of the main theme by the cello before the running piano passages. But Rostropovich must have had his own good reasons for choosing the faster tempo.

BOGDASHEVSKAYA HAD the skill and technique to pull off the extremely fast running passages. However, the clarity was obscured by too much pedal, which made the notes less exposed. Even so, the impact of this

masterful work turned out to be one of the most profound sensations.

Following the program, Rostropovich and Bogdashevskaya obliged with a generous presentation of three encores. In one of them, a march by Britten, Rostropovich tantalized and dazzled the audience with unusual bowing techniques and sound effects.

One learns to accept and live with practical limitations. However, after hearing this recital, not being able to follow artists of the stature of Rostropovich around the globe seems to be more unacceptable than ever.

Raim's performance ranks high

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It is hard to pinpoint what makes some musical performers more impressive and superior to many others.

It isn't merely that they can do certain things better than those in the audience. A person who speaks his native language more fluently than we do wouldn't become a cause for admiration or astonishment. Similarly, many average performers have an ability that is superior to that of a non-musician simply due to more extensive exposure and training in their specific field. At least, some performers evoke the illusion that a person with a modicum of talent could reach their level through extensive practice and perseverance.

Yet, there is a small minority of performers who shatter this illusion as soon as they produce the first few

notes. Their superior ability isn't merely a result of superior training, but they seem to belong to a superior species. One such person is pianist Cynthia Raim.

Raim is a Detroit native. Among her teachers were Misha Kottler, another living legend in our midst, as well as Rudolf Serkin and Mieczyslaw Horowitz. Among her coveted achievements is the first prize in the Clara Haskil International Piano Competition in Switzerland. More recently, she may be remembered by our audience from her performance of the Rachmaninoff Paganini Variations in the Meadow Brook Music Festival.

THE FACT that her recital last Friday at the Detroit Institute of Art wasn't sold out is a reflection on the poor judgment of our concert goers. In terms of quality, there is no doubt that she ranks at the top.

The program consisted of "Fanta-

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stucke," a group of short piano pieces by Schumann, "Carnival Music" by the contemporary American composer George Rochberg and the Sonata No. 3 in B Minor by Chopin.

When Raim performs, every muscle in her body participates in perfect harmony. While there are body movements, these aren't excessive or showy. Rather, every vein and muscle is enlisted in the goal of producing a superior and artistic musical sound.

We often hear the term "singing quality" applied to a piano sound. We know, of course, that this is only a descriptive term, there is no actual imitation of the human voice in the strict sense. But when listening to Raim's playing of the Schumann pieces, such a logical distinction seems more absurd than ever.

Rochberg is one of those composers whose music I tend to listen to only as in last resort. His "Carnival Music" is one of his tonal compositions, borrowing some phrases from the classical

masters, among them a segment from Brahms' intermezzo in the fourth movement, "Stumato."

OTHER MOVEMENTS contain elements of jazz and rag. These facts in themselves do not guarantee greatness of a musical work, but Raim's performance certainly did. When she was moving rhythmically to the blues style in the second movement, this form suddenly gained in stature. It went far beyond the trivial motions that anybody can reproduce with little effort or education. One could not escape the feeling that the ecstasy was real and genuine and, moreover, profound.

The rendition of the Chopin sonata was a demonstration of flawless proportion. No, I didn't fail to detect the few wrong notes in the final movement. Yet, the term "flawless" is still justified as a general governing rule. One could hardly imagine a better combination of agility, lyricism and power, applied at the right degree and at the right moment.

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