

Watts finds concerto's aesthetic brilliance

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra's Meadow Brook season had a wet beginning last week. With pouring rains and chilly temperatures, the lawn was virtually deserted, except for a handful of devotees who braved it with umbrellas and makeshift tents. Many others opted for the relative safety of the pavilion, where many seats were available.

Things would have been different under more favorable conditions. The main attraction of that evening was pianist Andre Watts, who consistently draws large audiences. The work he performed — Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto — never fails to generate a high level of enthusiasm.

Its appeal wasn't significantly dampened by the weather on this occasion. Watts, whose capabilities go beyond his impressive technique, captivates audiences on a regular basis. This time there was more emphasis on art and less on flamboyance.

Rachmaninoff's Second Concerto is technically one of the most challenging works. Yet, several times Watts

refrained from technical showmanship in spite of the opportunity to do so. The more lyrical parts would develop gradually, sometimes even too timidly, until reaching a degree of full and ripe passion.

TECHNICALLY, HIS PLAYING was clean and meticulous. There were a few compromises in tough spots, such as the opening theme of the final movement, where he omitted some of the fast, subsidiary notes while emphasizing the main body of the theme. Such minor relaxations of the formidable technical rigors did little, however, to diminish the aesthetic brilliance.

The orchestral part, under guest conductor Libor Pesek, was mostly correct and adequate, but not distinguished. If he felt intimidated by being in the shadow of a far better known celebrity, this may be understandable. However, he had a chance to shine in the other work which opened the program — four parts from Smetana's tone poem "Ma Vlast" ("My Fatherland"). This work is evidently close to the heart of the Czech-born Pesek, who conducted

the music from memory.

Of the original six parts of this work, only the "Moldau" is performed with regularity, and it was among the four selected portions.

While some of the other parts are of lesser quality, it is still possible to make a good case for their performance. One memorable performance of the complete cycle was given at Meadow Brook by Paavo Berglund a few seasons ago.

PESEK'S PERFORMANCE, while mostly correct and reasonably balanced, failed to penetrate the barrier of chill and wetness. This music always tends to evoke in me

scenes of warmth and sunshine, with only some occasional clouds.

The final part, for example, "Bohemia's Meadows and Forests," is full of suggestions of nature's green. In this performance it reminded me of that dreary scene in the old black and white "Hamlet" film, starring Lawrence Olivier.

I wouldn't go as far as to suggest that something was rotten in the state of Bohemia, but something was certainly amiss in this performance. The soggy rain didn't help, to be sure. But I have seen substantially better attempts to overcome adverse external conditions in the past.



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