

JOY AND SIMPLICITY

BY PIERRE-NICOLAS COLOMBAT

On a mild January night the Stadtcasino Basel opened its doors on the occasion of a similarly warm and convivial program of Russian music. Even though they come from the same country, were both immigrants, and were contemporaries, Stravinsky and Rachmaninov are worlds apart musically speaking and this matched the strangely mild air during what one would expect to be a relatively frigid month. Just as the warm air looks to spring and the cool air looks back to winter, Stravinsky's neoclassicism proposes new aesthetics for the 20th century while Rachmaninov's vast 2nd symphony draws on the old 18th and 19th century warhorse genre.

Frank Peter Zimmerman opened the night with a compact, sparkling, and joy filled rendition of Stravinsky's violin concerto. Throughout the performance, one felt that Zimmerman and conductor Robert Trevino were perfectly in sync regarding their aesthetic approach to this repertoire. It was a performance that drew attention to itself not through outbursts of subjective expression and intimacy but rather through a cool and clean execution of the piece's various themes, textures, and technical passages. With this deference to the work and its construction all while relishing the wildness and color of the modern musical language, one truly understood the aesthetic legitimacy of neoclassicism, which sometimes gets accused of being a regressive genre. A particular highlight was the palpable joy and freedom with which Zimmerman dispatched the tricky solo part. At times grinning ear to ear, turning to play chamber music with orchestra members, and making no issue at all of playing from a score, Zimmerman brought joy and simplicity to a composer who too often gets label as a dramatic iconoclast.

The second half of the program presented an entirely different perspective on early 20th Russian music. Rachmaninov's symphony is very much in the mold of post-Tchaikovsky aesthetics. The piece was composed 14 years after the death of Rachmaninov's predecessor. If in the first half, the orchestra members had a chance to shine as chamber musicians, here they gelled wonderfully under the baton of Trevino to draw a yearning and vast Romantic canvas. Immediately from the music's first measures,

one felt that this was an expression that had no frame and would flow until the edge of the horizon if given enough time. Despite the danger of potentially having too much weight and creating a burdensome monument, Trevino and the orchestra kept the music on the wings of the wind and told of a legend with patient breadth. The famous second movement left audience members breathless before the third movement's introspection. After the joyous and tumultuous fanfare of the final movement's close, the audience returned the offering with rapturous applause that were well deserved. The orchestra fully deserved it as their gigantic effort didn't waver for a single measure through this simple yet diverse epic program.