

André Laplante, pianist with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra

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Review: RPO masters Russian classics

Stuart Low, Staff Music Critic

The Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra explored the lighter side of Russian music Thursday night, with expert guidance from the Leningrad-born maestro Vladimir Verbitsky.

"Russia Lite" may seem a strange concept when talking about much of that country's music, literature and politics. But its major composers did create zestful pieces when the spirit moved them — or whenever Stalin felt that the masses needed spiritual uplift.

The RPO's splendidly performed program, which repeats Saturday night, featured Prokofiev's youthful Classical Symphony and Glinka's Valse-Fantaisie — lighthearted pieces that Stalin might have dismissed as decadent bourgeois tripe. It also included Shostakovich's Symphony No. 9, whose high spirits enraged Soviet authorities expecting a musical description of Russia's victory over the Nazis.

But the highlight was Canadian pianist André Laplante's blazing traversal of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3. Tall and intense, with a white mop of hair, Laplante resembles a Disney-style absent-minded professor. As in the 1961 movie with that title, he seems fueled by gravity-defying Flubber.

His fingers sprint, leapfrog and tumble with almost supernatural ease through

this showpiece's devilish runs. In the galloping second variation of the Tema con variazioni and in the concerto's explosive finale, his hands often look like a one-man ballet troupe.

Amid all this manic activity, Verbitsky was a cool command post.

He directed Prokofiev's lyrical melodies and sardonic touches with efficient, economical gestures. He could have made the third movement's soaring woodwind theme more expansive: It's one of the few places where the music pauses to breathe. But this performance won a richly deserved standing ovation. Verbitsky found jaunty humor in Prokofiev's Classical Symphony, a familiar piece too often played on automatic pilot. He took the first movement at a leisurely pace that helped reveal the brash harmonies beneath its prim neoclassical facade.

He kept the Larghetto's opening violin melody extremely hushed — as if eavesdropping on a distant courtly dance — and comically tweaked the Gavotte's prissy rhythms. The players responded with precision and élan.

The RPO strings delivered beautiful phrasing at ultra-soft volume in Gliere's [sic] Valse-fantaisie, whose elegant melancholy recalls such Russian novels as Pushkin's Eugene Onegin.

Artist Management

Shostakovich's Symphony No. 9 is programmed fairly often today, no doubt because of the "bright mood" that its composer wanted to instill. Yet it has broad touches of sarcasm and tragedy that Verbitsky pointed up — from the sassy trombones in the opening Allegro to the wintry tinge of the bleak Moderato. In the latter movement, principal clarinetist Kenneth Grant delivered sinuous, impassioned solos. He was matched in the Largo by haunting elegies from bassoonist Karl Vilcins.

The final three movements, played without a pause, drew the most impressive playing. The unison brass produced organ-like sonority, and the entire RPO charged through frenetic, intricate passages with hairtrigger accuracy.

Verbitsky brought the symphony to the patriotic finish that Stalin must have expected. But as in so much of Shostakovich's music, the cheerfulness comes through clenched teeth.

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