

André Laplante
Liszt Concertos #1 and #2
with the New Jersey Symphony

Pianist Laplante paints musical portrait of Liszt

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As the 200th anniversary of Franz Liszt's birthday has been feted throughout the year - the exact date was Oct. 22 -- the virtuoso pianist and composer has been variously described as the original rock star, a misunderstood man of strong religious convictions and a key figure in music history.

Each of these takes is valid, and under music director Jacques Lacombe, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra gave a full, respectful portrait at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center on Thursday.

Audiences may notice that stages have been looking different; for example, the cellos and basses have moved from stage left to stage right. As Lacombe explained, the changes aim to get the most satisfying sound from the orchestra and the acoustics of the venue. Even if the power of suggestion may be at work, their sound's depth and definition have stood out.

Liszt specialist André Laplante appeared as the soloist for both of the composer's piano concertos. In Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1, the orchestra opened with a galvanizing burst of energy in its martial double-dotted rhythms. Laplante asserted an ample, orchestral sound and built suspense as he intrepidly scaled the range of the piano.

Without becoming overly sentimental, Laplante imparted dreamy, downy sound to the reflective music of the second movement, although in the third movement, a little more sprightliness to match the brisk orchestral part might have been ideal. The swarming strings and ripping brass the NJSO brought to the allegro vivace were a fine match for Laplante's liquid steel timbre and the considerable skill he brought to its pianistic demands.

In Piano Concerto No. 2, Laplante played equally elegantly in passages of a straightforward few notes, intricate discursive interludes and cascading chords that built to impressive strength. Cellist Jonathan Spitz's warmly, sensitively played gracenote-inflected solo had the heartstring-tugging effect of a tenor's cry.

The clanging, rumbling harshness Laplante lent to more virile music was a welcome intrusion and worked well against the rising tide of the orchestra. Rhythmic sharpness made the escalating fervor of the closing movements particularly exciting. Still, the concerto performances had room for a little more character in the spirit of the composer's showman reputation.

In the episodic tone poem "Les Preludes," Lacombe led an evocative, buoyant performance, with its many transitions smoothly integrated. There were moments of deep, trembling string sound that built anticipation, gushing waterfalls of cleanly arpeggiating violins, heroic brass cries, prettily



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fluttering flutes leading into a pastoral section, strings sweetly shimmering over a delicate harp, and a final triumphant fanfare.

The orchestra also gave a taut, intimate rendering of Wagner's "Siegfried Idyll," an instrumental love song that shows the composer at his most tender. If it seemed occasionally on the line between delicate and overly tentative, it still expressively conveyed the characters' yearning from first whispers to passionate outcries.

As an encore, assistant conductor Gemma New led the "Dance of the Sylphs" from Berlioz' opera "La Damnation De Faust" with a gentle sweep and evident feeling for the music. The brief work wasn't much of a showcase for her, but enough to make one want to see her on the podium again.

Ronni Reich: (973) 392-1726 or rreich@starledger.com

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