

CSO and guests offer refreshing night of Rachmaninoff at Ravinia

By Wynne Delacoma - Fri Aug 03, 2012

Thursday night's Chicago Symphony Orchestra concert at the Ravinia Festival was remarkably refreshing, despite the sticky humidity and a heavily romantic all-Rachmaninoff program. With the gifted Italian conductor Gianandrea Noseda on the podium and Sean Botkin as the crisp, no-nonsense piano soloist — both making their Ravinia debuts — the performance offered an attractive combination of transparency and full-bodied heft.

The repertoire lineup followed well-worn concert tradition — a piano concerto in the middle and a big, noisy orchestral showcase to close the show. But choosing Rachmaninoff's relatively short, less familiar Piano Concerto No. 4 added a nice dash of the unexpected, and the muscular *Symphonic Dances* contain so much orchestral color and verve that they seem perennially fresh.

Noseda made his CSO debut in 2010 in Symphony Center with a program that included Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 1, and in February 2011 he filled in at the last minute for Riccardo Muti who was recovering from surgery. Noseda is a conductor to watch. In the *Symphonic Dances*, he expertly balanced Rachmaninoff's intricate interplay of short solo bursts and full-bodied unison playing. Without slowing down the momentum of the hard-driving, assertive first movement, the leisurely solo phrases of J. Lawrie Bloom's dusky bass clarinet found ample space to rise and melt away. Brighter woodwinds darted by like tiny birds, and the conversation between a languorous alto sax and pastoral English horn was beautifully phrased.

That scrupulous attention to tonal balance also suffused the Piano Concerto No. 4. Rachmaninoff struggled for decades with this piece, finally putting it to rest in 1941. It is hardly one of his greatest hits; the slow second movement repeats a short, heavy-treading musical motif to the point of listener exhaustion.

But it's worth hearing, especially given the phenomenal clarity that Botkin brought to Rachmaninoff's dense, crunchy chords as well as his blazing arpeggios. He is one of those pianists who manages to make us actually hear the inner notes of thick, fast-racing passagework.

Soprano Nicole Cabell, an outstanding alumna of Lyric Opera's Ryan Opera Center and a Ravinia favorite, opened the evening with a luminous account of Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise*. She sang with a satiny, burnished tone that caught the wistful longing of this familiar wordless morsel. With the CSO as her discreet, understated companion, Rachmaninoff's long, seamless melodies became an intimate revelation. She and Botkin returned for a joint encore, dipping into Rachmaninoff's deep canon of songs for a sensitive performance of *Zdes' Khorosho*, Op. 21, No. 7.

One niggling note. Why do so many artists neglect to tell audiences the titles of their encores? Certainly only the most Rachmaninoff-obsessed listener would have recognized the song Botkin and Cabell chose on Thursday. (I tracked down the information backstage after the concert.) Maybe some listeners enjoy this habitual game of Name That Encore, but it strikes me as an irritating affectation that only reinforces classical music's unfortunate reputation as an insular temple open only to the initiated few.