

Symphony goers treated to impressive night of firsts

By RICHARD RAND

TUSCALOOSA — On Monday evening, at the Moody Music Building, the Tuscaloosa Symphony Orchestra offered an exceptionally rich and rewarding program, its third of the season. Leading the orchestra was David Stahl, a guest conductor brought in as a last-minute substitute from Charleston, S.C.

REVIEW

It was an evening where youth would shine: the program began with the U.S. premiere of "Winter Steps," a brief and powerful piece by Douglas Knehans, an Australian-born composer currently teaching at the University's Music School.

Next came a performance of Sergei Rachmaninoff's "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini," featuring Cynthia Raim as the piano soloist. Last but not least came a remarkable performance of Felix Mendelssohn's "Scottish" Symphony in A Minor (opus 56).

"Winter Steps," composed in 1983, is a witty, ambitious, inventive

and passionate work, scored for enormous forces, with extra brass and woodwinds, extra tympani, and a piano.

A "passacaglia," repeating its subject 28 times over a span of 10 minutes, it moves from soft to loud, across two magnificent crescendos, before lapsing again into softness. Full of solos, it offers the orchestra very few places to hide. The musicians played seamlessly from start to finish.

The Rachmaninoff was equally impressive, all the moreso for being

overworked during the past 60 years. Raim worked in perfect combination with the orchestra.

Since she has played here before, her technical brilliance, her poise, clarity and electric precision are not a complete surprise.

Beyond all this, she kept the singularity of all 24 variations without losing sight of the concerto-like sweep of the piece as a whole.

But perhaps the most remarkable success of the program, a landmark in the history of the TSO, came with the "Scottish" Symphony. It is, to

begin with, one of the strangest and most obscure works in the repertory.

Organized in four movements, it does not progress in definite steps. It often seems to arrive ahead of itself, and in doing so, it seems not to set out at all. It could be said of this long piece that we never really leave the opening "andante;" on the other hand, we may feel that we were never in it, since it comes across as an overture pointing elsewhere.

Another mystery, well under-

stood by Stahl, is the importance of the conductor to the success of this piece. Mendelssohn was himself the first orchestral conductor in the modern sense; he was also the first composer to write music requiring a conductor of this kind. He invented the orchestra and its music as we have known them for a century and a half.

Mendelssohn would most certainly have applauded Stahl for his achievements: he did not force the music to unroll or unfold, like a carpet; rather, he let it expand like a

galaxy. It never dragged, it never repeated itself, it never bogged down in fussiness or ran aground in fretful haste.

The orchestra knew this as well as anyone: rare is the band that will play a triple "forte" at full force, unless it knows that someone — David Stahl, in this case — will be there to greet them at the other side.

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