

ILYA KALER

Musicians' performances are stunning

After decades of Cold War paranoia, the Russians have finally invaded Albuquerque. And we love every minute of it. In the last two Popejoy Auditorium concerts Executive Director Marian Tanau has brought in a trio of world-renowned Russian musicians to perform with the New Mexico Philharmonic.

First it was Alexander Gavrylyuk[cq] with a phenomenal Rachmaninoff Third Concerto. Last Saturday night violinist Ilya Kaler[cq] joined veteran conductor Victor Yampolsky[cq] for an evening of music from the cold northern climes, Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony along with "Alla marcia" from the Karelia Suite and the Violin Concerto of Jean Sibelius of Finland.

The "Alla marcia," though actually a call to battle section of the nationalistic Karelia Suite, came off as light and cheery with little of the dark, massive sonorities which virtually define Sibelius. It even includes a piccolo solo (Sara Tutland[cq]).

Recorded twice by the great Jascha Heifetz who championed the work, the highly individual Violin Concerto gives the soloist some very different kinds of things to play. Rather than the gypsy-like melodies of other concertos of the era, Sibelius's writing is often moody and introspective, even at times aloof. More than any other concerto it juxtaposes thick orchestral passages with solo playing sparsely or at least quietly accompanied.

Ilya Kaler demonstrated definitely why he won the triple crown of violin competitions with playing of informed spontaneity and an immaculately focused tone. One is unlikely to hear a better performance anywhere.

The slow Adagio, unusually rich in color for Sibelius contains one of his most memorable melodies. Here Kaler's tone glowed like a warm fire indoors, gentle respite from the frozen Finland landscape. The final honeyed violin note was the very definition of pianissimo.

Musicologist Donald Tovey called the final Allegro a "polonaise for polar bears." I once heard it accompanying a video of the ascension at Balloon Fiesta where it worked wonderfully well, emphasizing the universality of this music. Kaler provided a stunning display of virtuosity, giving the sense that we are hearing something quite new.

After tumultuous applause, he returned to the stage for an encore, the Gavotte from Bach's Third Partita for solo violin, played with the grace of a master making a difficult piece seem as effortless as water falling off a leaf.

Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony has always posed something of an enigma. It can be seen as optimistic, pessimistic, or even a generous mixing of the two extremes. Of his 15 symphonies it has remained the most frequently played. Conceived on a huge canvas it spans nearly fifty minutes in duration.

Victor Yampolsky led the work with a sense of adventure and discovery. He, after all, had worked with the composer in Russia. Beginning with the roughly-hewn theme in the cellos, Yampolsky carefully balanced the often shrill and grotesque orchestral colors of the second movement Allegretto, its harsh harmonies adding to the macabre feel. It may be a joke but played by whom on whom?

After an otherworldly Largo, the final movement almost in defiance broke loose in a whirlwind of textures, blazing to a final conclusion. Optimistic or pessimistic? Surely this performance declares nothing but optimism for the future of the New Mexico Philharmonic.