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Soloist and symphony excel

MUSIC REVIEW

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By John Zeugner Telegram & Gazette Reviewer

Can music compensate for a history of anguish? Monday night in Mechanics Hall it seemed so. In 1943, Americans supplemented British incineration of the German city of Hamburg, generating firestorms that literally sucked the life and oxygen out of 80,000 victims. More than 50 years later Hamburg palely returned the favor by providing accommodation for Mohammed Atta and his cell as they did the final planning for the 9-11 attacks. Yet, Monday night, when an American violinist, Robert McDuffie, stood before the current Hamburg Symphony, led by a Russian (!), Andrey Boreyko, and tossed off a riveting version of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D — it brought Worcesterites celebrating out of their seats, even after the first movement. Was the experience transcendent or just ironic? Only a dour reviewer struggling to find a lead could ask such a question.

The concert began with a somewhat tentative, lackluster rendition of Mendelssohn's thundering overture "The Hebrides." It seemed the 75 musicians of the Hamburg symphony were settling into the magic acoustics of Mechanics Hall: The audience hears everything, but sometimes the musicians on stage have difficulties hearing each other.

The first movement is rather long and perhaps some thought the concerto was over, or perhaps the Worcester audience had joined the vanguard of Italian audiences who lately have begun applauding not only after movements but sometimes right after energetic cadenzas, seeking to make concerts a bit more interactive. In any event Boreyko, arms aloft, back to the audience, waited and waited for the crowd to settle down before beginning the limpidly rendered second movement, which tailed directly into the rollicking finale. This time everybody stood up, calling McDuffie back several times.

The second half was given over to Brahms' pastoral second symphony, whose rich sonorities are a supreme test for all sections of an orchestra. The Hamburg's initial horn and woodwind work set a very high standard indeed; the orchestra unfurled an amazing, almost bell-like, unified sound, then faded to gentle pizzicato strings, Boreyko engagingly mimicking his players by strumming pizzicato on the back of his baton hand. The second movement achieved an aching tenderness, a thick, pure tone of ethereal beauty, a kind of redemptive cosmic harmony. That was an apex not really sustainable in the third and fourth movements. Attacks got sloppier, entrances slightly awry. A rousing conclusion could not deflect the let-down, but the audience still stood cheering.