

Season-opening performance by KSO was uplifting, spirited

By Harold Duckett, Friday, September 21, 2012

Down in the dumps?

Pianist Orion Weiss' magical performance of Sergei Rachmaninoff's 1901 "Concerto No. 2 in C Minor for Piano and Orchestra," Op. 8, with the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra at the Tennessee Theatre on Thursday night was the right fix for a case of the doldrums.

For doubters of music's salubrious powers, writing the piece rescued Rachmaninoff - forever linked to Knoxville by his last performance here on Feb. 17, 1943 - from a debilitating, three-year-long clinical depression after critics destroyed his confidence by ripping his first symphony to shreds.

Weiss, playing with a severely sprained right ankle, delivered the spectrum of nuances that have become characteristic of his performances. His playing was refined yet had enough power for the piano to hold its own in big orchestral passages and the gentleness for the gorgeous second movement.

The duet, in the middle of the second movement, between Weiss' softly singing piano voice and principal clarinet Gary Sperl's lovely melody was solace for the soul.

But the Rachmaninoff wasn't the only piece of music on the program worthy of cherishing.

After a rousing playing of the "Star Spangled Banner," with which American orchestras traditionally begin season-opening concerts (it's nice to hear it circumstances other than sports events), KSO conductor Lucas Richman began the program with a spirited performance of Johannes Brahms' "Academic Festival Overture," Op. 80, written in 1880 as a thank-you note for an honorary doctorate bestowed by the University of Breslau.

That was followed by an especially vigorous performance of Richman's own "Summer Excursions," written in 2003. Its series of delightful thematic episodes of summer band concerts and barbershop quartet tonalities connected with driving, sometimes dancing, interludes.

Collectively, "Summer Excursions" had the kind of luminous interior spaces that are the mark of American composer Aaron Copland's music, a reference fully intended by Richman.

One could hear those glowing centers in the KSO's terrific performance of Copland's "El Salon Mexico," a Rubic's Cube of a piece to conduct and play because of its shifting rhythms and tempi.

It's often utilized by orchestras as a test of abilities for auditioning conductors, and Richman passed with flying colors at the beginning of his 10th season as conductor and music director of the KSO.

Bravos to all!