

Punta Gorda Symphony Leaves Them Cheering



Pianist William Wolfram, left, and Punta Gorda Symphony maestro Raffaele Ponti join hands to acknowledge a standing ovation after Wolfram's rendition of "Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 1" recently at the Charlotte Performing Arts Center in Punta Gorda.

Standing ovations have become somewhat of a regular occurrence during Sunday performances of the Punta Gorda Symphony at the Charlotte Performing Arts Center in Punta Gorda. But two acclamations Jan. 26 may have been the longest and loudest in a long time.

One was for international award-winning pianist William Wolfram's performance with the orchestra of Mozart's "Piano Concerto No. 21 in C major." The other was the orchestra's 45-minute rendition of Tchaikovsky's "Symphony No. 5 in E minor, Op. 64," involving every instrument in the 80-piece orchestra, under the baton of maestro Raffaele Ponti.

Setting the stage for the evening, the orchestra opened with Felix Mendelssohn's "The Hebrides, Op. 26," a musical, mood setting tone poem recreating the sound of the sea at Fingal's Cave off the coast of Scotland.

There were intense, rolling melodies of storm-driven waves, interspersed with the soothing quiet of still waters and tranquil surroundings experienced by Mendelssohn as he visited the cave in 1830.

Then came Wolfram, who has performed with some of the leading orchestras around the world. He played Mozart's classic "Piano Concerto No. 21," considered to be one of the composer's masterpieces.

Wolfram played while communicating with Ponti and the orchestra, his fingers flying across the keys as many in the audience sat in silence.

He played through the concerto's quiet lyrical elegance, through fanfare and its fortissimo march of drums and bass, and the particularly haunting, almost spiritual, second movement that was the theme for the 1967 movie "Elvira Madigan."

As he finished with his arms in the air, applause was deafening. The audience kept calling him back to the stage.

As the patrons then milled into the lobby at intermission, one patron was heard to gush, "Was that exciting, or what?"

After intermission, it was all Tchaikovsky, with the orchestra playing his Fifth Symphony, displaying the style, energy and accomplishment that it has achieved in its seven years under Ponti. The strings, the brass, the timpani, the woodwinds— the entire orchestra—melded together in a robust, performance of perhaps Tchaikovsky's most difficult symphony.

He had re'Written it himself over five years before he was satisfied, in 1893, that it was worthy of his name. It was one of his final works in a short life of self-doubt and ill health.

It was also somewhat of a reprise for the symphony. Three years ago, in January 2016, the then-Charlotte Symphony Orchestra performed Tchaikovsky's sixth, and final, symphony, "Pathetique" - his life, and pending death, set to symphonic music. It was premiered in 1893 in St Petersburg, Russia, nine days before his death. Its second performance was at his funeral.

Nevertheless, the performance of a Tchaikovsky symphony Sunday - a soaring performance of the orchestra in its full, triumphant sound - was greeted, once again, by an audience out of its seats. They cheered and shouted continuously, until the orchestra, and Ponti, stood to acknowledge the accolades, again and again.

In a post-concert interview, Wolfram told the Sun, "We really played a good Mozart. I think they're great. I really do. We rehearsed the slow movements this afternoon, and it really paid off. It's slow, it's intimate, it's hard to do.

"I'm very impressed. The orchestra is extremely good. The maestro is extremely musical and he's also committed. You've got a good thing going."