

SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL CONCERT REVIEW

Grieg, Bruch, Stravinsky, Paganini, Tchaikovsky: Yuri Bashmet (solo viola/ conductor), Moscow Soloists Chamber Orchestra, Roy Thomson Hall, Toronto, 17.2.2009 (PPLL)

Grieg: Holberg Suite for String Orchestra (1884)

Bruch: Kol Nidrei (old Jewish prayer) Op.47 (version for Viola and Strings) (1881)

Stravinsky: Concerto in D for Strings (1946)

Paganini: Concertino in A Minor for Viola and Orchestra (also known as Quartet No. 15 in A Minor Op.4) (c.1818-1820)

Tchaikovsky: Souvenir de Florence (version for String Orchestra) (1890)



Picture - Courtesy of the Mariinsky Theatre

There are Russian programs throughout the concert season – we hear them regularly – and then there are the *really* Russian programs; Yuri Bashmet and the Moscow Soloists being the latter. As violist, conductor and founder of the Moscow Soloists, Bashmet is clearly one of the most intensely communicative musicians of today and he demonstrated this quality tonight whether as a soloist, playing on his 1758 Testore viola (a model similar to the one Mozart played), or as leader of this chamber ensemble.

Grieg's *Holberg Suite* was pure bliss; rich basses and clean, vibrant, violins gave Grieg's musical language both the requisite freshness and sheen. Bruch's *Kol Nidrei Op.47*, originally conceived as an adagio for cello, showcased Bashmet as the consummate violist and despite its short duration, the music reflected the brilliance of Bashmet as he floated a deliciously rich tone over a sensitive accompaniment.

The *Concerto in D for Strings* remains one of Stravinsky's most colorful, yet difficult works, for string orchestra, and, perhaps for this reason, it is equally one of his least known compositions. The *Concerto* follows the traditional Baroque structure (fast-slow-fast), and, under Bashmet's direction, the Moscow Soloists highlighted the piece's varied textures and intricate rhythmic pulses. The first movement *Vivace* alternated between high-spirited humor and seductive nostalgia. The second movement *Arioso* was impressive and this rumbled into the beginnings of the third movement *Rondo*, where the coordination of the ensemble was put to full test – the chiseled melodies, amidst mysterious, buzzing, tremolandi, are interspersed between elegant, dance-like episodes – and its performance was magnificent.

Bashmet impressed in Paganini's *Concertino in A Minor for Viola and Orchestra*, his own version of a quartet for violin, guitar, viola and cello, with his bowing technique, and, together with the shimmering sounds from the ensemble, the audience burst into spontaneous applause at the end of each movement.

Tchaikovsky's *String Sextet in D Minor*, better known as the *Souvenir de Florence*, was performed tonight in its version for string orchestra. Here, Bashmet's guidance was clear, summoning a sparkling sound from his players, his approach appeared to be that of a master gently encouraging his able charges. The first movement began quickly, beautifully paced in tempo and dynamic. The Adagio was rich and sonorous and the final Allegro was well defined.

Bashmet conjured up three encores, the first of which turned out to be an unexpected highlight of the evening; the best performance of Albonini's *Adagio in G Minor* heard in ages, with the quietest of dynamics, but maintaining, with clarity, the finest of details. After an enthusiastic cheer, Tōru Takemitsu's arrangement of the *Waltz* from 'Face of Another' (1989), was given an enjoyably schmaltzy performance. Then, after a roar from the audience, Bashmet returned to the stage with his instrument to give an electrifying account of the Schnittke's *Polka*, and his ensemble crackled with high-spirited energy.

Patrick P L Lam