

# Spivakov conducts back-to-back comparison of famous works

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TORONTO — Forty years after winning the International Violin Competition in Montreal, Moscow-born-and-raised Vladimir Spivakov, who has become one of the world's most diversified symphonic conductors, led the National Philharmonic of Russia in one of the best classical music concerts of the 2008-9 season recently at Roy Thomson Hall.

This full-house concert's two highlights were the appearance of virtuoso pianist Denis Matsuev, and an illuminating back-to-back comparison of how Peter Tchaikovsky in the 19th Century and Sergei Prokofiev in the 20th Century each composed music to the theme of Romeo and Juliet.

Matsuev, the first major Russian pianist of the post-Soviet era,

performed Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto #1*, which is so difficult that it is rarely performed.

This early work by Rachmaninoff lacks the distinctively famous melodies of, for example, his *Piano Concerto #2* or his *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*. It will never make the classical "hit parade." But in terms of multi-textured innovative harmonic progressions and fast bravura piano passages (but with ample slow interludes as well) *Piano Concerto #1* is far more sophisticated than are his better-known later works.

Matsuev superbly met the difficult challenges posed by this concerto and at the same time treated the slow movement with suitable tenderness. Though still young, Matsuev, displaying his mastery of this three-movement concerto, shows all indications of becoming the 21st Century's

equivalent of his famed pianist predecessors Artur Schnabel and Vladimir Horowitz.

Seldom have the two most famous musical interpretations of Romeo and Juliet been presented back-to-back as in the second half of the concert. Conductor Spivakov accentuated the comparison through his very tight yet sensually expressive direction of the NPR's lush string section, led by seasoned concertmaster Eremey Tsukerman.

The romantic main theme of Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet fantasy overture lacks an equally memorable tuneful equivalent in Prokofiev's *Four Pieces* from the *Romeo and Juliet Suite*. However, the other dimensions of the Romeo and Juliet story as portrayed by Prokofiev, especially his opening movement *Montagues and Capulets*, are not only as equally melodically memorable as anything in Tchaikovsky's interpretation; but they convey a more multi-textured approach, which more accurately expresses the complexity of Shakespeare's tragedy than does Tchaikovsky's melodramatic approach to the Montague-Capulet family conflict.

Following the standing ovation, which followed the Romeo and Juliet comparison, Spivakov, in an extraordinary act of generosity, presented five encores, which amply demonstrated the National Philharmonic of Russia's excellent ability to perform in a lighter vein, culminating in a rendition of a fast dance by the famed Armenian mid-20th century composer Aram Khachaturian. The encores evoked constant standing ovations.