

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLO

REVIEW

Philharmonic powered by Shostakovich's spirit

By GREGORY BARNES, Special to The State, Tue, Oct. 10, 2006

Nicholas Smith and the S.C. Philharmonic opened Saturday's splendid all-Shostakovich concert at the Koger Center with a spirited reading of the Festive Overture.

The First Cello Concerto was followed by Seventh Symphony, which is also called "Leningrad," named for the Russian city Germany had under siege for 900 days.

Cello soloist Zuill Bailey is graceful, and this is an amazing piece, ingeniously fabricated from a distinctive four-note figure that arrives immediately and in later movements.

Bailey, as sportscasters would say, "showed up" ready to play, especially in the third movement, a giant unaccompanied solo. It was dark, brooding music that morphed into a veritable cello frenzy, with Bailey's left hand flying up and down the fingerboard like a whirling dervish.

The second movement, based on a gentle folk tune, should have been otherworldly, combining ethereal orchestral textures and shimmering cello harmonics. Unfortunately, the textures were bumpy.

Maybe it was a visual thing: Smith chose large conducting patterns for such fragile atmospheres, beating time with both hands.

The finale was great, and the principal horn, the only brass player on stage, earned a solo bow along with Bailey.

Anyone in the audience totally unfamiliar with Shostakovich's Seventh was probably blindsided by this astonishing musical drama of epic proportions. There were more than 20 brass players on stage. As was the battle, "Leningrad" was immense, grandiose, yet poignant and tender.

The first theme bounced confidently, the second sang like an agonizingly beautiful nightingale. But the main business was a cute march that turned fierce and barbaric. It built to massive proportions, so intense your heart rate climbed as the heavy artillery—the low brass—entered the fray.

It ultimately disintegrated. Shostakovich lets you down from the conflict gradually for a final lament. But there was one ironic march reminder left, just as the half-hour tragedy came to a close.

And that's just the first movement.

Composed in 1941, Shostakovich was a teacher at Leningrad Conservatory and a volunteer fireman during the siege. (Some think Shostakovich's angry march is more about the Communist party's 1936 denouncement of his music.)

Smith's pacing of the long symphony was impeccable, frequently rallying his troops. Outnumbered strings held their own, violins better than usual. Pitch disparities were noticeable, but not offensive, in extreme high registers of each instrument family. But in sum, it was a major victory for orchestra, conductor and the great war-symphony.

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