

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLIST

THE MODESTO BEE (Modesto, CA)

Symphony: From Russia with love

By STEPHEN THOMAS

The Modesto Symphony opened its 2004-05 classical concert season Friday with excellent performances of Russian masterpieces by Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninov.

Maestro Darryl One began the evening by announcing the loss of longtime symphony member Yvonne “Vonnie” Schmitt, who died last week in an auto accident. One dedicated the performance of the first piece on the program, Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Russian Easter Festival Overture,” to her memory.

This gesture was very appropriate. The hopeful nature of the music’s thematic material derives from an Easter-themed chant of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The music begins quietly with a number of solo instruments, including cello, that play brief melodic cadenzas over a shimmering background of sound from the strings.

The flute solo performed by Monique Ledoux was particularly lovely in tone and phrasing; later in the work, James Klein offered a soulful trombone solo in imitation of a church cantor.

A challenge in performing this work is the fragmented nature of its structure. Consisting of many small statements of chant, which develop briefly only to pause or stop altogether, Rimsky-Korsakov’s piece requires the utmost attention by conductor and players to manage frequent and sometimes subtle changes of mood and tempo.

Mostly, these transitions were handled successfully, if a little tentatively at times. The shifting nature of the music also can prevent the listener from perceiving the overall architectural organization of the piece. The orchestra handled this challenge well, and the rise to the magnificent and triumphal conclusion of the piece capped a fine performance.

Next the orchestra and audience welcomed American cellist Zuill Bailey to perform Tchaikovsky’s “Variations on a Rococo Theme,” one of the staples of the cello concerto literature.

Bailey’s manner on stage — comfortable, confident, involved, but not overly intense — put listeners at ease and allowed this music’s pleasant and playful moments to dance to life.

Bailey’s movie-star looks (think Donny Osmond à la Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat), occasional off-handed smiles and physical size seemed to erase the sense of exertion one can sometimes sense in a cellist playing an enormously difficult work.

In his hands, the cello seemed almost like a toy that he effortlessly cajoled into song, and every scale skipped playfully up and down the fingerboard. Sometimes, the piece requires notes so high that they go well beyond the fingerboard — Bailey caressed these notes on his 1693 Goffriller with gorgeous tone and vibrato that would have been the envy of any violinist.

For its part, the orchestra kept pace, though there was some disagreement about tempo in some of the faster variations.

During an informal “Talk Back” session between One, Bailey and interested audience members after the concert, One and Bailey admitted that some of these performance tempos didn’t match what they had planned in rehearsal.

The concert’s second half was dedicated to Rachmaninov’s final work, the “Symphonic Dances.” While it may still be a somewhat less familiar piece of the symphonic literature to many listeners, the “Symphonic Dances” offer many opportunities for the orchestra to demonstrate both its power and sensitivity.

All sections of the orchestra performed well in this challenging piece. Particularly notable was the lush string sound in the melodies of the first movement, well-balanced and elegantly phrased wind section playing throughout, and the rich and powerful brass sound of the final movement.

If this “Romantic Russia” concert is any indication, more outstanding musical adventures clearly await Modesto audiences.