

Tucson Symphony Orchestra Season Opening Dazzles

Written by Amanda Savage

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By: Alyssa DeMember

The Tucson Symphony Orchestra opened for its 85th season on Friday at the Tucson Music Hall. A Russian-themed performance consisting of three musical pieces, TSO dazzled audience members with a night of elegance and stunning song.

The performance, titled "Victorious Shostakovich!" featured two of Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich's works, "Festive Overture," and Symphony No. 7, "Leningrad" as the first and last pieces, with Russian composer Alexander Glazunov's "Violin Concerto" in the middle. Performing "Violin Concerto" was honored guest Jennifer Frautschi, a Grammy-nominated violinist, in her debut with TSO.

"She's an acclaimed musician, but she's not a household name yet like Yo-Yo Ma," said Terry Marshall, associate director of marketing and public relations at TSO. "But she will be."

Patrons dressed in faux-fur coats and shawls, sequined dresses, and suits and ties filled the waiting area eagerly. The chatter was lively as they mingled amongst each other, getting drinks at the bar and using special tickets to spin prize wheels.

Sturdy, iron-like lighting fixtures with large, spherical bulbs hung over the waiting area, casting a soft, evening light. The doors to the performance hall opened and the crowd made its way in amongst the three floors of the Tucson Music Hall. While older audience members seemed to dominate, younger patrons were sprinkled throughout the crowd as well.

Just minutes until the show would begin, the mix of musicians tuning their instruments created an eclectic contrast of sounds, like the score of a suspenseful thriller. It unintentionally, yet perfectly, built up the anticipation.

Then, conductor and music director George Hanson, in his 18th year with TSO, walked out to the front of the stage, dressed in a tuxedo like most of the male musicians. A smile lit up his entire face as the lights dimmed and the audience hushed. And then they began the "Festive Overture," Hanson animated and energetic in his conducting.

The music is bright as happy trumpets play notes that sound as if a king were coming before his court. The trombones and strings join in, and then the flutes with a light-hearted melody. It is playful, like childhood, as the sounds of each instrument blend together as one smooth sound.

"It's always good to come back to work," violinist Ben Nisbet said. This is his seventh season with TSO. "There's a lot of excitement playing again with all of these people."

The next piece, Glazunov's "Violin Concerto" played in the key of A-minor, featured the long-awaited performance of Jennifer Frautschi. She emerged onto the stage in a lime green, sparkling evening gown, her long dark hair falling gently against her back. The music had a somber, yet graceful feel as Frautschi effortlessly glided her fingers up the neck of the violin. The rest of the string orchestra accompanied her as it shifted from major to minor notes, clarinets joining in playfully. The music was reminiscent of an afternoon day in the spring. From a quick tempo with dramatic violins and trumpets to a more gentle, beautiful sound, this song seemed to tell an emotional journey of ups and downs. A woman in a nearby seat smiled, little wrinkles forming near her eyes. Audience members' eyes were glued to the stage, watching Frautschi perform in natural, fluid motion. When the song came to an end, the audience rose to give Frautschi a standing ovation.

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"I think the audience is always so appreciative of soloists," Beth Sachrison, a TSO patron and Tucson pediatrician said. "We have a thirst for music." She and friend Kathy Bowen, a fellow pediatrician, have been coming to the Tucson Symphony together for the past 16 years. Bowen has had season tickets to TSO for nearly 25 years.

For the third and longest piece of the performance, "Leningrad," George Hanson spoke directly to the audience about the piece. Written circa 1940, "Leningrad" symbolizes the German invasion of Russia during World War II.

"This was Shostakovich's representation of the noble and heroic Russian people," Hanson said. It tells the story of their clash with the Nazi regime (the various instruments almost "battling" each other) and their rebuilding process.

The story of this song, played in C-major, began with hopeful optimism as violins played a gentle melody, the tempo slow and certain. However, minor notes occasionally came forth, foreshadowing something ominous on the horizon. Audience members looked serious, intently observing the piece as the tempo sped up and the rest of the instruments exploded into a flurry of exciting, circus-like sounds.

However, the attitude of the music changed when the tapping of the snare drum began, growing louder every second. The strings and brass picked up speed, loud and commanding, with off-notes suggesting threat and danger. The cello players plucked their strings and let their bows hit against the body of the cello, resembling gunshot sounds. The notes of the higher instruments battled against the notes of the lower ones, their sounds contrasting and fighting for attention, but still sounding organized and thoughtfully put together.

After a while, the raucous died down and the music grew soft and cheerful once again.

"It's the special beauty of a flower blooming amidst the rubble," Hanson said during his address to the audience before the piece began. It seemed fitting right at this moment.

Then, as if representing the strength in Russia's ability to rebuild after disaster, the orchestra picked up the tempo again, all instruments joining in for what felt like a joyous rebirth. The song grew louder and louder—the timpani pounding, trumpets blaring, everything building up in a dramatic crescendo—and all at once, the music stopped in perfect unison.

The audience erupted in applause, giving another standing ovation for the entire symphony orchestra.

Simply put, the performance was stunning. Audience members took sharp inhales of breath, smiling at one another as they rose from their seats, making their way out to Tucson's vibrant downtown area.

"I think [the Tucson Symphony Orchestra] is a really important cultural piece of Tucson's art scene," Nisbet said.

"I'm proud to be a part of it."

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