



Midwest Young Artists Conservatory Symphony Orchestra
Dr. Allan Dennis, conductor
Pick-Staiger Concert Hall
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by Michael Cameron

Considering the disastrous reception that greeted his first symphony in 1897 under the baton of Alexander Glasunov in St. Petersburg., it's a wonder that Serge Rachmaninoff was able to summon the courage to try his hand in the genre a second time. The first experience sent him reeling into a three year tailspin of chronic depression, a condition ameliorated only after months of therapy, hypnosis, and eventually a temporary relocation to Dresden.

Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2 is nothing if not sprawling, even long-winded. The success of the premier and the composer's subsequent readings of it were undercut by doubts among other conductors about it's near hour length. For decades after it's premier in 1908, performances were often cut, sometimes mercilessly so. These attempts at editing flourished in part because the composer himself seemed not especially committed to publicly defending its honor.

In recent years the original score has gained traction among Rachmaninoff's more fervid champions, and it was this unabridged version that Allan Dennis and his Midwest Young Artists Conservatory Symphony Orchestra brought to Pick-Staiger Concert Hall Sunday night. There are other flashier, more overtly virtuosic orchestral works in the canon, many of them tackled by the MYA orchestra on previous occasion. But few of them test stamina and tax string sections more than Rachmaninoff's formidable 2nd.

Dennis began his reading with an ominous incantation from the lower strings, a "motto" theme that appears as a fragment of the main idea, setting up the fuller treatment by the violins later in

the introduction. The upper strings reached a resplendent climax before English horn player Annika McDermott-Hinman intoned a mournful phrase, leading directly to the allegro proper.

As the longest movement of the symphony, the first poses a particular challenge for interpreters. Dennis and his forces paid particular attention to structural signposts, many of which are fortunately marked by the introduction and re-statements of some of the composer's most memorable melodies. String tone and technique was uniformly superb throughout, and concertmaster Anna Stenzel contributed a beautifully molded solo passage, providing an echo of the movement's introduction. Rarely, if ever, have I heard the MYA strings play with such polish and commitment.

While this is undoubtedly a string centric symphony, the brass and percussion added heft to the first movement climax just before the return to the opening tunes. Credit principal trombonist Reid Harman and trumpeter Hannah for leading the charge. Principal clarinetist Alex Abreu also excelled on numerous solo flights.

Rachmaninoff is not as esteemed as some of his Russian counterparts as an innovative orchestrator, but the bubbling scherzo show flashes of brilliant orchestral colors. The opening flickers of light from the violins (with brittle open e strings) and horns served as a launch pad for a taut reading of the scherzo. In an unusual feature for this form, the composer inserts a lush and lyrical interlude, and once again the upper strings rose to the occasion. Sonorous trumpet, horn, and lower brass choruses announced the final bars, a nimble fadeout that softened to a whisper.

In a broad-boned symphony such as this, it isn't surprising that new ideas are employed to announce extended introductions and transitions. Yet the sublime Adagio seems to emerge from nowhere, and Dennis played up this feature with hushed opening notes that quickly surged into a full-throated statement of one of classical music's most enduring melodies. It's a tune that can easily morph into overwrought Hollywood schmaltz, but Dennis let the impossibly long-winded tunes emerge organically. The clarinet solo is one of the most prized possessions in the instrument's repertoire, and Abreu was easily up to the task, spinning the captivating tune with great attention lavished on its natural shape, a feat made possible with remarkable breath control.

The fourth movement opens with a march-like episode in the home key of E (but this time in a triumphant major mode) with MYA's fine trumpets, horns, and percussion providing much of the heavy lifting. The return of the principal melody of the slow movement by the violins came wistfully bathed in a mist of nostalgia, decorated with beautiful roulades by principal flutist Jonathan Wo.

The final bar hits the listener with a rhythmic figure common to many of Rachmaninoff's bigger orchestral works, and not only was this gesture delivered with a satisfying snap, audience adrenalin was boosted by a jubilant shout from the podium. It was hard to believe that nearly an hour had passed since the opening bars, so enthralling was the performance and so keen was the attention given its forward sweep. A memorable performance indeed, and in sheer vigor and commitment comparable to that of many a professional orchestra.