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MUSIC REVIEW

Returning to Cozy Tradition For a Season's 2nd Welcome

By ZACHARY WOOLFE Published: September 28, 2012

When is an opening night not an opening night? Perhaps when it is the second of two.

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Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times New York Philharmonic at Avery Fisher Hall, with the violinist Itzhak Perlman, in its Thursday night program, featuring Respighi, Massenet and Rimsky-Korsakov.

The New York Philharmonic has started most of its recent seasons with a gala concert that invariably gets a ribbing from critics for its reactionary, cozy programming, full of overplayed standards.

But this year the Philharmonic tried a neat trick: a more artistically ambitious (if hardly adventurous) event to open the subscription season and then, a week later, the traditional crowd-pleasing gala, in this case featuring the beloved violinist Itzhak Perlman. You assuage the critics, then delight the donors. Everybody wins.

Well, no.

At Thursday's gala, presented in an Avery Fisher Hall packed with the orchestra's patrons and given the imprimatur and reach of public television's "Live From Lincoln Center," which broadcast the concert, there was no question that this evening was the real opening night, the one that represented the Philharmonic and its values for a vast majority of people in New York and nationwide.

It is depressing that the orchestra should reinforce the belief of millions that reassuringly, relaxingly lush, lyrical sounds like those on offer — Respighi's Technicolor tone poems, as well as short nothingnesses for violin and orchestra by Rimsky-Korsakov, Massenet, Tchaikovsky, Sarasate and John Williams — are the extent of symphonic music. But what else should listeners think when that is what is overwhelmingly peddled by orchestras, record

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Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times Itzhak Perlman

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labels and "Live From Lincoln Center"?

While the Philharmonic and its music director, Alan Gilbert, certainly did not create this trend, [they have not done enough](#) to resist it. I respect the impulse that led to this year's two-openings compromise. But you can go only so far in having it both ways.

Buoyed, perhaps, by its recent performances of Stravinsky's intense "Rite of Spring," Mr. Gilbert and the orchestra attacked Respighi's bombastic "Fountains of Rome" and even more bombastic "Pines of Rome" with gusto. The wave of brass that closes "Pines of Rome" was certainly mighty, but subtler passages, like the soft woodwind lines near the start of the "Pines of the Janiculum" section, were played with sensitivity.

Those two Roman blasts served as bookends for Mr. Perlman's performances of the five chestnut miniatures. At this point in a career that has lasted nearly 60 years, Mr. Perlman's playing has its faults: his characteristic golden tone is more uneven now, and he had a shaky ascent to a climactic high note in the "Meditation" from Massenet's "Thaïs."

If he remains an artist you feel compelled to watch and listen to, it is because he has a rare sense of drama, an instinctive understanding of how to develop a musical line. Using rubato to shape the melodies of Rimsky-Korsakov's stirring "Fantasia on Two Russian Themes" naturally, Mr. Perlman convinced you, briefly, that there was life in the old standard yet.

The New York Philharmonic will perform on Saturday at Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center; (212) 875-5656, nyphil.org.

A version of this review appeared in print on September 29, 2012, on page C3 of the New York edition with the headline: Returning to Cozy Tradition For a Season's 2nd Welcome.

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