



Aleksey Semenenko, *violinist* STRINGS

Review: Seattle Symphony's Shostakovich Concerto Festival

Thomas May | Strings | January 26, 2017



The Seattle Symphony just offered a rare chance to hear all six of Dmitri Shostakovich's solo instrumental concertos back-to-back in a two-day marathon (January 19–20) featuring three young virtuosos, all led by the ensemble's associate conductor, Pablo Rus Broseta.

I found myself particularly drawn to the artistry of 28-year-old Ukrainian violinist Aleksey Semenenko, who plays a Carlo Ferdinando Landolfi violin. Winner of the 2012 Young Concert Artists International Auditions and second prize winner at the 2015 Queen Elisabeth Competition in Belgium, Semenenko also plays in the Stolyarsky Quartet (which he founded).

The two violin concertos were presented in reverse order, with No. 2 in C-sharp minor, Op. 129, on the first concert and No. 1 in A minor, Op. 77, at the conclusion of the festival. If the piano concertos (especially the first) jab at Romanticism with the spear of parody, the Second Violin Concerto embeds a quietly desperate longing for heartfelt communication that at times finds itself stifled and deflected by the orchestra's interpolations. Semenenko's playing encompassed the needed extremes of rich, lush tone and austerity, evaporating at points to a vibrato-less, above-the-battle ghost. With Rus Broseta's sure guidance of the orchestra, the violinist played with deep sensitivity and chamber-like focus in his intimate exchanges with solo winds.

To this taste the highlight of the entire festival arrived with the epic First Violin Concerto, written during one of Shostakovich's crisis periods with the authorities (the postwar denunciations of 1948) and thus suppressed until he felt safe enough to unveil it in public in 1955, after Stalin's death. A few slight waverings in intonation aside, this was a genuinely masterful performance. Semenenko's powers of concentration pulled the audience in from



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his opening, spun-out solo in the first-movement nocturne. Much as Shostakovich cannot be reduced to an either/or figure (follower of the Party line/secret dissident), it does an injustice to his music to pigeonhole the tone of, say, the Scherzo as “sarcastic” music. Semenenko emphasized its kaleidoscopic animation and frenzy.

The weighty Passacaglia ranks among the most moving music Shostakovich ever wrote—here, ironically, constricting himself to the presets of an ancient, prescribed form. Like the First Cello Concerto, it culminates in a massive, powerful cadenza that is the violinist’s equivalent of a Shakespearean monologue—so it was in Semenenko’s performance, all the more effective with his careful, self-aware pacing of events that build to the *Burlesca* finale.

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