

Detroit Symphony and Jarvi put a fresh face on Beethoven piece

By Lawrence B. Johnson
Detroit News Music Critic

It may be the most recognizable classical music ever written, ultra-familiar to concertgoers, a cliché to the jaded. And still Beethoven's Fifth Symphony remains arguably the most perfect work of its type ever created.

Certainly a persuasive case was made Thursday night at Orchestra Hall in a thriller of a performance by Neeme Jarvi and the Detroit Symphony.

The Detroit Symphony hadn't played the Fifth Symphony in eight seasons, and this renewal indeed exuded a freshness that matched its energy, precision and dramatic flair.

It began a bit too dramatically as Jarvi, having ascended the podium to start the concert's second half, plunged into the famous fanfare before his listeners had ended their welcoming applause — or rounded off their intermission chatter.

But that cavalier, almost reckless entrance gave no hint of the taut, charged, powerfully constructed reading that would unfold. Never pushing the tempo, Jarvi allowed the work to surge forward on the internal energy of its tightly wound rhythms.

At every turn, in every light, in the elegantly wrought double variations of the second movement and in the scherzo's shadowy suspense, Jarvi kept a firm grip on the most remarkable feature of the Fifth Symphony: its absolute concision. No musical gesture was wasted, and none overindulged.

The Detroit Symphony, which seems to be destined for a championship season, again played with a combination of heart and style matched by a nearly unblemished technical luster. When Beethoven's last, grand C-major chord had expired and Jarvi turned to face the cheering house, he radiated pride. He was entitled.

The program's first half offered

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two generous portions of high romanticism. A century and a half after Liszt composed his symphonic poem (Mazeppa), it's hard to grasp why we're still hearing this slam-bang, windy, repetitive depiction of a 17th-century adventurer who ended up a war chief. One must credit the Detroit Symphony with a hearty performance of a shallow piece — and by the same token note the rousing reception it got.

More engaging by far was Franz Xaver Scharwenka's Olympian Fourth Piano Concerto, which received a spectacular reading at the hands of Alexander Markovich.

Cast in the mold of Brahms' Second Piano Concerto, Scharwenka's massive four-movement work suggests a bridge of style and temperament between the glittering concertos of Liszt and the brooding, grandiose concertos of Rachmaninoff.

The Polish-born Scharwenka (1850-1924) was himself a celebrated virtuoso, and no less a pianist could begin to play the Fourth Concerto. Yet Markovich, displaying a silver tone and poet's sensibility, tossed off the most demonic requirements as if they were routine. His *tour de force* not only brought down the house, it drew genuine applause from an orchestra and conductor who clearly enjoyed the ride.

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