



Glass half full for TSO

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Toronto Symphony Orchestra

★★★

With guest conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin and cellist Shauna Rolston. Repeats tonight at Roy Thomson Hall, 60 Simcoe St. **416-593-4828**.

It's too bad one can't buy a half-ticket to a symphony concert, because the pre-intermission part of this week's all-Russian Toronto Symphony Orchestra program at Roy Thomson Hall is a must-hear.

The same can't be said for the second half, despite wonderful playing under the dynamic direction of young Montrealer Yannick Nézet-Séguin.

The two gorgeous pieces in the first half use only strings and woodwinds (plus French horns): the Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Introduction to Kovantchina*, from 1886, and Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's 1876 *Variations on a Rococo Theme*.

Toronto cellist Shauna Rolston is the amazing guest soloist for the Tchaikovsky piece, taking centre stage with her gleaming grey carbon-fibre cello.

Last night, she made full use of this rich-sounding instrument, masterfully shaping phrases and shifting moods from frothy to fearsome. She showed off her blazing technique during the many virtuosic solo passages.

Rolston's fabulous performance was perfectly matched by the orchestra. It sounded as if they had been playing this piece together for years.

Nézet-Séguin kept the sound light, but every musical nuance was accounted for.

Then came the second half, where the 31-year-old conductor was allowed to plunge his musical paintbrush into the full spectrum of orchestral colour and dynamics in Alexander Scriabin's 1904 *Symphony No. 3 "The Divine Poem"*.

There was no doubt that Nézet-Séguin was in full command of the 50-minute piece, whose three movements are played without interruption.

The orchestra sounded the best it has all season. But the bloated composition itself left a lot to be desired.

This *Symphony* is like super-sized fast food — all calories and little nutrition. It suffers from too much of everything: more instruments! more notes! more crescendo swells! more false climaxes! more repetition of the same themes!

Scriabin's musical depiction of a spiritual journey from doubt to universalistic epiphany is too much of everything. Just as when you mix too many paint colours together and get an icky brown, Scriabin's overstuffed score emerges from the stage like a river of sonic sludge.

Credit the conductor and players for their bravery, and call it a noble failure. It's by trying less well-known pieces alongside the chestnuts that one keeps both players and listeners engaged.

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