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Gergiev, Volodin, London Symphony in brilliant Kennedy Center concert for WPAS

Saturday afternoon's performance by the London Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center easily qualifies as a finalist for a best-of-season ranking. I wouldn't be surprised if this presentation of the **Washington Performing Arts Society** turns out to top my list when all is said and heard for 2008-2009 in the region. It was, quite simply, a very hot concert.

The LSO, of course, has long been in the upper echelon of ensembles, and that's certainly how it sounded on this occasion, with sumptuous strings, sturdy winds and brass, impeccable percussion. And the orchestra seemed totally in sync with its principal conductor, Valery Gergiev, who was at his own incisive best. The event also boasted a remarkably compelling piano soloist, **Alexei Volodin**, featured in Beethoven's Concerto No. 4, placed between two Prokofiev symphonies on the program.

At first, I wished the whole afternoon could have been devoted to Prokofiev, a composer Gergiev has deep affinity for; he and the LSO just gave some all-Prokofiev programs in New York to much praise. But those thoughts faded the moment the Beethoven work started, when Volodin phrased the famous opening solo with such freshness and depth that you couldn't help but be



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drawn into the music. The pianist's playing throughout was notable for its ...

rich musicality, prismatic tone and effortless technical fluency, and Gergiev had the orchestra operating with similarly impressive sensitivity, color and power. The combination of all that interpretive energy onstage unleashed the concerto's volatile mix of poetry and drama with unusual effectiveness.

The audience, clearly taken with Volodin's exceptional work, was rewarded with an encore of Rachmaninoff's G-sharp minor Prelude (Op. 32, No. 12), delivered with exquisite warmth and nuance.

Serving as the concert's bookends were Prokofiev's best loved symphony, No. 1 (nicknamed the "Classical"), and one of his least-known in the West, No. 6. Gergiev's

tempos in the first three movements of the First Symphony were unhurried (Yuri Temirkanov, an early mentor of Gergiev's, holds back here as well), and that extra breathing room allowed the darker, edgier elements behind this otherwise ebullient music to register more strongly. The beautifully detailed interpretation, which found the LSO articulating with superb clarity and tonal sheen, was marred only by some oddly loud air system noise in the hall that abated only after the performance of the First ended.

The Sixth Symphony was the crowning portion of the afternoon -- a riveting, even disturbing experience. In this score, Prokofiev seems to have tapped into his deepest self, the way Shostakovich did so often. This is deeply personal material, a diary of painful thoughts and conflicted emotions. The music was written in 1947, when the wounds of the war were far from healed; those wounds seem to haunt the notes. No wonder the symphony was attacked by the Soviet culture goons not long after the premiere -- all that gloom and angst couldn't possibly fit in with the artistic needs and ideals of the state.

The first two of the three long movements offer some of the composer's most complex and challenging ideas; the third is deceptively simpler and cheerier at first, only to be overtaken by the lingering shadows of the earlier

material at the end. Time and again, the ear is startled, as much by the force of percussive outbursts (including the ominous, clock-like sound that Prokofiev used so vividly in other works) as by the surges of lyricism.

This is music in continual conflict, seeking for an ever-elusive resolution, and Gergiev caught all of that tension masterfully, summoning from the LSO not just a brilliant technical effort, but a level of expressive intensity that never let up.

There was more Prokofiev as an encore, "The Montagues and the Capulets" from the composer's ballet score, *Romeo and Juliet*. There were odd laughs from the audience after the initial assault of dissonance -- perhaps people, done in by the Sixth Symphony, assumed Gergiev would lighten the mood and mistook this for some sort of joke. But the conductor didn't seem caught off guard by the reaction, and plunged ahead to generate from his ever-responsive players a terrific sonic impact.