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Symphonic Magic
By Viktor Yevgrafov

At the closing of the Oryol Fall Musical Arts Festival, our symphony orchestra performed with guests from New York: conductor Jean-Pierre René Schmitt and saxophonist Javier Oviedo. The interest of the listeners at this concert was huge.

Cooperative Sources

President of the non-profit organization “New American Association for Culture and Education”, Margarita Kagan, made the suggestion to the Regional Department of Education, Culture, and Sports Administration to examine mutual collaborative aspects for the realization of a classical music program. The idea was approved. The Department found the money to make it a reality. And on October 31, Jean-Pierre Schmitt and Javier Oviedo (as Association “ambassadors” and representatives of art in the USA) arrived in Oryol.

Somehow, just like that, it turned out that the Oryol orchestra members and artists from far away continents developed a mutual sympathy toward each other. “If I were to meet, for example, a Russian clarinetist or cellist on the street, we would not find a common language. But the sheet music is capable of uniting us. Music becomes our common language,” says the director.

During Rehearsal

A not-too-tall person with a charming smile and courteous manners, the American maestro quickly managed to get the Oryol musicians on the same page with him. He has powerful charisma. Each gesture is filled with strong energy. Professional remarks are given out politely, in a friendly way. An interpreter was not needed. The director's hands carried the orchestra as though experienced captains of ocean liners.

Of course, the program was prepared beforehand with artistic taste by the manager of the orchestra, Vassily Shkaptsov, but JP Schmitt contributed his corrections, his vision, and his understanding of the composers' intentions.

He is 63 years old. He is French. He studied at the Conservatories of Paris and Versailles. He took private lessons from the great French conductor Jean Fournet. He has been living in the States for over 20 years. He founded the French-American Chamber Orchestra and managed other groups, such as the New York Lawyers' Orchestra. It is not only once that he has performed in the halls of Carnegie Hall and the U.N. He traveled around with tours in many countries on this and that side of the ocean where he won the love and respect of musicians and audiences.

In-born talent and excellent education and experience allowed him to create a miracle with our orchestra within just one week. The orchestra played a sound of unprecedented beauty, softly. The dynamic of “piano”, for example, sounded of especially good quality that is rarely heard. String, wind, and brass groups coordinated with each other like well-fit puzzle pieces. During the performance appeared an acoustic space highly concentrated with imagery. In this space, as if one single whole, existed our orchestra and the magnificent soloist, famous saxophonist Javier Oviedo, who is loved not only in the USA but in many countries in Europe – performer, pedagogue, and musicologist, renowned expert of the saxophone and its possibilities.

Miracle of the Concert

Such programs, like on that memorable evening, are unique. It is real symphonic magic. The Rhapsody for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra by Claude Debussy was performed. The voice of awakening nature created by the orchestra is heard in the air. With it, the saxophone joins in the musical dialog. In Javier Oviedo's hands, the instrument laments and rejoices, wonders, and asks a question about something secret, hidden, then emotionally answers to the orchestral accompaniment. It answers melodiously, sublimely. What more is needed in order to penetrate the miraculous world of the great French impressionist composer, and comprehend his sensitive soul?

Perhaps nothing more than listener fantasies awakened under the influence of magical sound of an orchestra destined to play well together and the unique soloist.

In the Concerto for Alto Saxophone and String Orchestra by Glazunov, Javier Oviedo awakened in me a vision of scenes of Russian plains on which travel lonely, melancholy wanderers. The tranquil, majestic, almost human voice of the saxophone weaves the invisible delicate emotional fabric of the Glazunov work. The joy of “lyrical heroes” rises in E flat major. The sorrow is light. Namely these traits of the Russian character are reproduced in the sounds of the foreign musician whose ancestral roots are far from Russia, hidden in Mexico. But Javier, with the help of music, deeply understood the Russian soul. He breathed it into his instrument.

Thanks to our foreign guests, we heard the rarely executed “Variations on an Original Theme” by Edward Elgar (1857 – 1934), English classic, whom Bernard Shaw, by his significance in English culture and music, compared with Beethoven. Here Javier Oviedo and the orchestra immersed us into the enigmatic world of melodies. There the composer “encoded” the names of his close friends.

We also got acquainted with the little-known (to us) Eugène Bozza, French composer. He lived in his country in the 20th century for 86 years and created a large number of works for wind instruments. His short “Aria” the American saxophonist did not just play through, rather sang on the instrument which obeyed him. Indeed, “Grand Brilliant Fantasia” (Variations on the theme “Carnival of Venice”) of 19th century composer and saxophonist Louis Meyer (associate inventor of the saxophone with Adolphe Sax) “invited” us to this carnival festivity, where anticipation and tension of emotions tangled with each other.

Yes, Javier Oviedo became in Oryol, without exaggeration, a triumph of the concert. Many of us for the first time in our lives heard, not in jazz but in symphonic form, how unlimited are the possibilities of the saxophone in the hands of a great master, and how well the saxophone creates a partnership, not only with big bands but also with symphonic orchestra. In this extraordinary concert program, a place was found for Hector Berlioz – his bright, festive overture, “Roman Carnival” – and Claude Debussy’s poetic “Prelude to the Afternoon of a Fawn”.

The finale of the concert was marked by “Petite Suite” for piano by Alexander Borodin (orchestral transcription by Alexander Glazunov). The seven-movement suite sounded in one breath light, without bumps, as if this moment were just born into the world.

Thoughts Aloud

The close of the Art Festival caused reason for some thinking.

First, we possess the opportunity to thank the American Association from the bottom of our hearts for its initiative which gave us a rare opportunity to listen (and become friends!) in Oryol with wonderful foreign musicians.

Secondly, we would like for our friendship to have become permanent and similar concerts to have been repeated. Listeners enrich themselves by new knowledge and impressions, orchestra members by experience, and the guests from far away get to know the remote parts of Russia from afar and, closer, get to know us and our culture. New York musicians came to Russia for the first time in their lives. They visited Oryol museums and looked at cathedrals and monuments. They liked the place we call home.

Thirdly, the Oryol Symphony Orchestra has turned 11 years old, and working with incoming talented conductors (Russian and foreign) will lead further growth in the orchestra’s mastery of performing. Will the region officials, upon seeing the influence and importance of classical music for the spiritual life of the Oryol citizens, finally think seriously about building the long-expected House of Music with a good hall? Here also the New York conductor, having worked one week with us before the beginning of the concert, publicly addressed government officials in the region with this request: “Do you want your wonderful orchestra to play even better? Build it a home!” By that he earned an extra round of applause.