

Northbrook Symphony Orchestra takes on rarely performed work

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By [DOROTHY ANDRIES](#) Classical Music Writer

Maestro Larry Rapchak has always had a unique approach to programming for the Northbrook Symphony Orchestra. "To present great works of music that have fallen into the cracks of performance for whatever reason," he explained, stopping just short of calling those words the music director's mission statement.

The orchestra will conclude its season Sunday afternoon with just such a piece: "Panathenaenzug" by Richard Strauss, a work for piano and orchestra that Rapchak has been longing to present for three years.

"It is the most accessible of works in the composer's whole repertoire," he explained. "It runs 28 minutes and it describes a festival in honor of the Greek goddess Athena."

Strauss was inspired, Rapchak said, by a frieze on the Pantheon. "He saw it and was fascinated," he continued. "It was a depiction of a celebration held in ancient Greece every four years. It ran for four or five days, starting with the reading of odes and musical performances. It included athletic contests, prayers, animal sacrifices and a parade through the city of Athens."

What sets the work apart from other descriptive orchestral pieces is a piano part, written for the left hand only.

It is one of several written for pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who lost his right arm in World War I. A wealthy man, Wittgenstein commissioned some of the most important composers of the time to write works for him. The most famous piece is Ravel's Piano Concerto for Orchestra and Left Hand, but Paul Hindemith and Erich Wolfgang Korngold composed for him as well.

"And he commissioned Richard Strauss to write two," Rapchak said. "One is 'Panathenaenzug,' which you'll hear on our program Sunday.

Finding a pianist was not easy, but after contacting several, including Leon Fleischer, who played left-handed repertoire for several decades due to a hand injury, Rapchak found Thomas Pandolfi, 32, a Juilliard graduate, who has been deeply interested in the music and style of masters from the Golden Age of Pianism, such as Rachmaninoff, Schnabel and Scriabin. "I knew this (Strauss) piece existed, but had never studied it," he said. "I have played the Ravel Concerto for Orchestra and Left Hand and some other left-hand works, plus all the standard piano repertoire. That information was in my biography."

It was just that information which prompted Rapchak to contact Pandolfi last year as the Northbrook Symphony's 2008-09 season was being planned. The young man accepted and began working on the score.

"I'm quite fond of it," he declared. "Unlike a concerto, it is not a virtuoso showpiece for instrument -- though it certainly has many difficult passages. It is a theme and variations, with the music unfolding in various textures. Since it is by Richard Strauss it is often very dense, but it has unusual orchestration, with a celesta and glockenspiel playing at times.

"The audience will hear something new. I think they will love it."

Pandolfi is going to maximize his time in the area. On Friday afternoon he will play on WFMT (98.7 FM) and Friday evening at 7:30 p.m. he will be the featured artist on the Parisian Salon Concert at the Northbrook Public Library. His program will include works by Liszt, Chopin, and a piece by Scriabin, written for -- no surprise -- left hand only.

Part of the appeal of Rapchak's programming is the clustering of music on a common theme -- in this case, exploring celebrations and cultures of the past. The Sunday afternoon program opens with a Chaconne by Gustav Holst, which segues nicely into the Strauss. The audience will also hear Edvard Grieg's charming "Wedding Day at Troldhaugen" and Rimsky-Korsakov's "Capriccio Espagnol."

The maestro is also keen on works that have never been played in the Chicago area, such as the Shostakovich Second Symphony, performed by the Northbrook Symphony in May of 2006 and Charles Villiers Stanford's Irish Rhapsody No. 4, which the symphony played last November.

"We got amazing feedback on that," Rapchak revealed, adding that he was anticipating a similar reaction to "Panathenaenzug." "I've searched around and believe that we have another Chicago premiere," he added.

"And you should hear the pianist," he said. "He's a terrific performer and he loves doing this kind of unusual repertoire."

That means Rapchak and Pandolfi should get along just fine.



NORTHBROOK SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Maestro Larry Rapchak will lead the Northbrook Symphony Orchestra in their final concert of the season May 3.

4 p.m. Sunday, May 3 at the Sheely Center for the Performing Arts, Glenbrook North High School. 2300 Shermer Road, Northbrook. (847) 272-0755 or www.theNSO.org.

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