

# Northbrook Symphony provides vivid pictures, musical and visual

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No one is doing what Larry Rapchak does with his Northbrook Symphony Orchestra. Last Sunday afternoon the audience in Glenbrook North's Sheely auditorium was given an experience of music, one work familiar, the other not, both enhanced by a visual dimension. It was not done to show pretty pictures or provide distraction. Instead, the visuals were an integral part of the music.

The familiar composition was -- no surprise -- Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition," written in 1874 and played in Maurice Ravel's brilliant 1922 orchestration..

It is the composer's portrayal of paintings by his friend Victor Hartmann, and Rapchak asked Leanne Block, fine arts instructor at GBN, to find students to illustrate the particular segments.

The results -- 28 pieces of artwork by 19 advanced level art students -- were fine indeed. As the orchestra played, the paintings were shown on a screen suspended above the musicians.

We saw three interpretations of "The Old Castle," one which looked Irish, one which seemed to be English and another that may have been French.

For the "The Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks in their Shells" we were shown pics of chicks, one of which included ballet slippers. During the wonderful promenade music, picture frames appeared.

The visuals did not in any way diminish the music, but instead brought us more deeply into the humor, sadness or grandeur of the subject.

This was the last concert of the Northbrook Symphony's season and they were playing better than ever. Their subtlety and flexibility have grown through the years. Nowhere was it more evident than in "The Old Castle," where the music was gentle, almost tentative, as if a person were wandering through the chilly castle halls alone.

"Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks" was performed with exceptional delicacy and precision, the bustle of "Limoges -- The Market" was palpable and the music for the "Catacombs" was downright frightening.

The rousing finale, "The Great Gate of Kiev," brought the audience to its feet.

"Pictures" was the last work on the program. The first was an amazing song cycle for bass voice that Shostakovich wrote in 1974 for verses by Michaelangelo. Their titles -- such as -- "Truth," "Love," "Anger," "Exile." encompass an array of human emotion.

The soloist was Peter Van de Graaff, one of the area's most popular singers, who has appeared in oratorios, operas, or States and Europe. The songs were in Russian, and English translations were projected on the screen above.

In addition to the words, segments of paintings by Michaelangelo were also shown, reflecting the mood of each song. Van de Graaff's tone is strong and straightforward, and he was at home with any accompaniment, whether the deep cellos that mirrored his tones or the elegant brass that soared through the auditorium.

Rapchak was a sympathetic conductor, taking care to sculpt the orchestral sound to the singer's voice and spirit. The finale song, "Death" contained piercing music and dynamic singing by Van de Graaff.

At the beginning of the concert Rapchak told the audience that the singer had told him that performing the songs would be one of the highlights of his life.

It certainly was one of the highlights of the 2008 concert season on the North Shore.