

THE

MUSIC SECTION

Ardent Shostakovich from Conlon

By Richard Dyer
GLOBE STAFF

Back in 1971, at the age of 21, James Conlon made his professional debut in Moussorgsky's "Boris Godunov" and he has pretty much been the most effective conductor of Slavic operas ever since. The man of the hour in Russian opera, we constantly read, is someone else, but Valery Gergiev has yet to prove his superiority to Conlon in this repertory, while hardly beginning to rival Conlon's explorations of other musical worlds.

Naturally, Conlon's qualities have been underremarked; American conductors are prophets without honor. Conlon has nevertheless achieved celebrity abroad; one reads with alarm that he has recently put his head into the notch of the Paris Opera guillotine — he becomes principal conductor there next summer.

At the moment Conlon is safer at Symphony Hall, where he has been a welcome visitor for 15 years; this time he has brought along an all-Russian program. Shostakovich is the frame for the box-office appeal of Joshua Bell in the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto.

Bell won a partial standing O from the audience and unanimous applause from the orchestra. He played quite theatrically, with a lot of hair tossing, knee bends, and Cos-

sack foot-stomping, but little of the drama made its way into the actual playing. This was a leisurely performance, refined, and full of suave violinistic detail. It was interesting to hear the piece played without vulgarity and vehement emotional expression, less interesting, even peculiar, to hear it played with very little emotional expression at all — it all seemed curiously abstract. Conlon's 25 years in the opera-house pit have made him an alert accompanist, and he was able both to give Bell what he wanted and to suggest, politely, what he himself might have preferred.

The prelude to Moussorgsky's opera "Khovanshchina" has long been in the BSO repertory in Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestration, which is more conventional — and less perilous — than Shostakovich's, Conlon's choice. This sets some tests for orchestral refinement that the BSO did not pass, although there was some notable solo playing by clarinetist Thomas Martin and guest oboe Laura Ahlbeck, who got to play an overlapping phrase with her husband, bassoonist Richard Ranti.

Shostakovich's "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District" must have had just about the most successful send-off of any opera in this century after "Der Rosenkavalier" — more than 200 performances in Russia in its first two years, and productions in seven major cities in the West. Then in 1936, Stalin saw it and denounced the composer, an event that pro-

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
James Conlon, guest conductor
At: *Symphony Hall last night (repeats this afternoon and next Tuesday night)*

foundly affected the rest of Shostakovich's life, and the fate of the opera, which only recently has begun to claim its rightful place in the permanent repertory.

Conlon, who led the triumphant Metropolitan Opera premiere of "Lady Macbeth" last season, has created a Suite mostly from the orchestral interludes that link the scenes. The suite demonstrates the abundant variety of Shostakovich's music, and its quality — everything from the notorious slide-trombone sexual music (Time magazine dubbed it "pornophony") to mordantly satirical circus tunes, and a devastating lament of exile. The suite may be overlong, but conducted and played this fervently, it made a powerful effect.

Shostakovich approaches extreme emotions by extreme registers, and there were important solos, wonderfully played, by piccolo Gera-lynn Coticoné, Martin on shrieking high clarinet, and Craig Nordstrom, bass clarinet. If you wanted to, you could read in the program book that the passionate central passacaglia follows a scene of murder by rat poison.

Cliburn: Sad times on memory lane

By Andrew L. Pincus
Special to The Eagle

LENOX — Perhaps legends, like sleeping dogs, are best left undisturbed.

Van Cliburn returned to Tanglewood Friday night after an absence of 29 years, and it was a wildly sentimental occasion, with ovations that probably kicked up dust clouds all the way back in Texas. But musically, this was a rocky ramble down memory lane.

Classical Review

Playing one of his standby concertos, the Rachmaninoff Second, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under James Conlon, the still lanky but now gray-haired pianist spun some lovely melodies, especially in the slow movement. He's all heart, this boy is — a romantic in an age of wind-up imitations.

Once a world great

But he's also, sadly, only a shadow of the Cliburn the world remembers. Much of the time on the rain-soaked night, volume came with percussiveness, notes fell by the wayside and phrasing was rudderless. And tempos were *slow*. Age — perhaps aging fingers, too — has its privileges.

Now 64, Cliburn has moved from limelight to shadows since he won the first Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow in 1958, refurbishing the pride of an America left reeling by the Soviet Union's Sputnik triumph in space. For the next 20 years, he appeared only intermittently in public, performing a limited repertory of mostly warhorse concertos.

Then in 1979 he withdrew from performing altogether, only to re-emerge in 1989 with a triumphal return to the Soviet Union. Since then he has performed a limited number of engagements, mostly with second- and third-tier orchestras, and busied himself as presiding genius and hometown hero at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, which he founded in 1962 in Fort Worth, Texas. His 1969 Tanglewood appearance was also his last with the BSO.

But memory has apparently not dimmed the glory of those early years — nor of Cliburn's many educational and charitable endeavors.

Preconcert cloudbursts wiped out most of what would probably have been a large Tanglewood lawn audience, but the sold-out Shed, joined by the BSO, erupted in a delirious ovation after the Rachmaninoff. The effusions climaxed with Cliburn embracing Conlon, who had brought him to Tanglewood, then blowing a kiss to the crowd and stooping down to chat with well-wishers in front of the stage. All the while, flashbulbs popped like lightning.

BSO did its job

But, truth to tell, the BSO's warmly and richly shaded playing under Conlon was more



Photo by Walter H. Scott

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consistently interesting than the erratic solo part. Cliburn can still turn the finale's lavish theme into moonbeams and roses, but the recordings tell the Van Cliburn story better. Was it the performance those thousands in the Shed were cheering, or the legend?

Conlon, whose many hats include that of principal conduc-

tor of the Paris Opera, opened and closed the program with sets of operatic excerpts. Neither set is in the BSO's everyday repertory, and probably as a result, both received rough-and-ready treatment — lively, if not lovely.

From Shostakovich's "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk," Conlon

himself stitched together a suite of three excerpts. The opera mixes satire with pathos, but standing alone, these rickety chunks don't make credible concert music. In the opera, the rattles of the xylophone and the snarls of the brasses are a vulgar commentary on bourgeois society. Here, they sounded merely vulgar.

No such problems vex the three standard orchestral excerpts from Wagner's "Gotterdammerung," which concluded the humid evening. Some of the playing made for choppy waters on the Rhine, but Conlon's pacing and sense of the unfolding drama gave Wagner's Siegfried a hero's stature in life and death.

James Sommerville, the BSO's new principal hornist, brought warmth and character to his big solos in both Rachmaninoff and Wagner. The brass section as a whole also got in some potent licks. But as has happened before this season, the brasses and the strings sometimes seemed to inhabit different stages.

In the Prelude Concert, seven BSO members gave assured, committed performances of Beethoven's Sextet for string quartet and two horns, Opus 81B, and Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 8. The seldom-heard Beethoven, with its hunting-horn effects, provided a romp. The Shostakovich was etched in tears.

Sunday, July 19, 1998 ****

ENCORE

Cliburn returns with performance in grand manner

By **PETER HALEY**
Special to the Times Union

Guest conductor James Conlon set the Tanglewood Festival's third weekend off with a star turn as conductor-arranger. On hand with top billing was the long absent pianist (for 30 years) Van Cliburn.

Conlon sandwiched Cliburn and his trademark piece, Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor, Opus 18, between two massive orchestral workouts; Dmitri Shostakovich's Suite from the opera "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk," and Richard Wagner's epic orchestral excerpts from "Götterdämmerung." ("Twilight of the Gods")

Conlon, in his own arrangement of Shostakovich's music, led the spirited opening with assurance, bringing vivid colors and wonderful playing from the orchestra. The music, often noisy and raucous, got the composer into a lot of trouble with Stalin and his henchmen during the 1930s, to the point where he was forced to re-score some of the music to satisfy the establishment's harsh demands. Shostakovich intended to do a triptych on the plight of women in Russian society, but "Lady" turned out to be his last opera.

Conlon chose three sections to highlight the composer's gifts: Dangerous Tension, Passacaglia, and The Drunkard. The score calls for extra players in all sections of the orchestra, with an especially enlarged percussion section, two harps, and organ.

The first movement registered strongly, giving way to thick string textures in the dense, chorale of the second movement, where the basses plummetered

MUSIC REVIEW

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
James Conlon, guest conductor;
Van Cliburn, pianist



CLIBURN

- **Where:** Koussevitzky Shed at Tanglewood, Lenox, Mass.
- **When:** 8:30 p.m. on Friday, July 17.
- **Upcoming:** Today at 2:30 p.m. James Conlon, guest conductor. All-Mozart program with Stephen Hough, pianist, and Jennifer Larmore, mezzo-soprano.
- **Tickets:** \$13-\$69.
- **Info:** (413) 637-5165.

to the depths of their range, underlined by the pedal of the organ. The busy, often bumptious third movement, was almost overwhelming as Conlon whipped the orchestra into stunning crescendos, charging the atmosphere for Cliburn's appearance.

Cliburn did not turn in a perfect performance. There were moments of hesitation and more than a few feathers flew, but what interpretation! While the Cliburn of 30 years ago sizzled with flare and spark, today's Cliburn gives a picture of piano playing in the grand manner, with musical matters carefully thought out and wrapped with decades of thought and experience. Conlon saved the day at more than one turn, but that's what conductors are

supposed to do. The two obviously understand where matters stand at this point in time, all to the benefit of the public.

Cliburn delivered the awakening chords of the first movement with deliberate control, addressing Rachmaninoff's melancholy with a touch of exaltation. The solemn and sad second movement gave Cliburn the chance to pour out the tenderness required for the sweeping upward arpeggios. There's still a gloriously focused trill from piano to forte, with resonance to spare. Cliburn brought the heroic strains of the martial third movement out with grandeur, sustaining the line with ample energy; nothing for show, everything for the music.

The intermission was obviously too much for the brass in particular, as Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* excerpts got off to a sloppy, lackluster start. Siegfried's Rhine Journey turned to mishap more than once in this rare "so-so" performance. Eventually the orchestra regained its focus for a beautiful "Funeral March," leading to a thrilling "Immolation Scene," complete with Wagner's quotations of earlier motifs of Magic Fire, Brunhilde's Ride with her Valkyrie Sisters, the haunting Redemption Theme, and the great chorale of Valhalla, home of the gods.

Conlon led throughout the evening without score. Lucky for the orchestra he's such a patient, consummate musician. Just like Brunhilde rescuing herself in flames of immolation, so, too, many moments for Conlon in this concert. Bravo.

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