

## A Lioness at the Keyboard

Washington D.C.

The Mondzac Performing Arts Center, Bethesda, Maryland

02/21/2009

**Carl Maria von Weber: *Overture to "Oberon"***

**Sergei Rachmaninoff: *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, opus 43**

**Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: *Capriccio Italien*, opus 45**

Elena Ulyanova (piano)

The Landon Symphonette, Richard Weilenmann (conductor)



Elena Ulyanova (© Walter Merriam)

Maestro Richard Weilenmann has been an irreplaceable fixture on the Washington music scene for over 40 years. Whether he is conducting symphony or opera, his performances are marked by style and enthusiasm. His career has been noted especially for his untiring efforts in the development and promotion of deserving and talented young emerging artists. This was the *raison d'être* behind his founding of the Landon Symphonette, which is now in its 18th season. The orchestra is comprised of two-thirds professional musicians, drawn mostly from the Washington National Symphony and the National Philharmonic. The other third consists of outstanding students from over 60 schools in the Washington, Baltimore, and Northern Virginia area. The sound of the symphonette is superb and the playing is detailed and accurate. The string sonority is quite lush and the brass/winds play with exceptional brilliance. The term "symphonette" is somewhat misleading as it denotes a chamber orchestra, but The Landon Symphonette is indeed a full symphony orchestra.

This particular Saturday afternoon's performance might be termed a "Pops Concert." It was not long and it contained popular warhorses from the standard repertory designed to entertain a family audience. Maestro Weilenmann led an energetic performance of von Weber's famous overture to his seldom performed opera *Oberon*, and concluded the concert with a rousing rendition of Tchaikovsky's popular *Capriccio Italien*.

The "Capriccio" was an excellent choice to highlight the various sections of the orchestra, and a special nod must be given to trumpeter Andrew Schuller whose clarion timbre in his solo passages was exemplary.

The star of the afternoon however was the virtuoso Russian pianist Elena Ulyanova. She studied at the Moscow Conservatory and the Gnessin Academy, and is renowned for her

brilliant performances of the piano music of Sergei Rachmaninoff. Having played extensively with the major Russian symphony orchestras and concertized throughout Europe, she is now appearing across the United States not only in concert halls but also on radio, television, while at the same time producing a series of DVDs and CDs dedicated to the music of Rachmaninoff.

Ms. Ulyanova's performance of the *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini* was nothing short of dazzling. Her beguilingly lovely face and petite feminine figure belie her astonishing capabilities. She is a Lioness at the Keyboard, playing with more strength and technique than most men. In fact, her playing, marked by power and poetry, recalled to mind the legendary Gina Bachauer. It was breathtaking to watch her fingers flying over the keys, and the sound she drew from the piano was amazing. The Rhapsody is a conductor's nightmare, but Maestro Weilenmann exercised complete authority over his orchestra and rendered, along Ms. Ulyanova, a truly exciting performance distinguished by verve and panache. I hope she will return to Washington at some point in the near future that we might hear her in a complete piano concerto. She is an artist not to be missed!

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