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Arts Notes: Williamsburg Symphony Orchestra opens new season with new director at helm

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The Williamsburg Symphony Orchestra with new director Michael Butterman at the helm. (Courtesy of Kim Kiely Photography) (Kim Kiely)

The Williamsburg Symphony Orchestra entered a new era of musical growth Thursday with its opening concert of the 2022-23 season in the Williamsburg Community Chapel.

The concert marked the official appearance of Michael Butterman as the WSO's new Music Director, his enthusiasm and dedication to the interpretative details of the works programmed signaled good times ahead. Articulate and talented, with exceptionally clean, crisp and musically sensitive baton work, Butterman proved to have the right stuff for top-drawer music making, right from the start with Brahms' Variations on a Theme of Joseph Haydn. With a theme, finale and eight variations, Butterman and WSO smoothly and effectively highlighted the many nuances of the contrasting variations, especially accents, that built to a restatement of the opening theme and heroic close.

Guest soloist was the wildly acclaimed pianist Natasha Peremski in Rachmaninoff's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, a tour de force piece with 24 variations requiring keyboard sensitivity, virtuoso technique and lyricism.



Although it's a candidate for over-heat, the treatment delivered by Paremski, so ably coordinated with Buttermann, cast a new light on it and made it captivating and totally engaging. Paremski was on top of the challenging demands, displaying the requisite keyboard finesse to probe the depths and scale the pyrotechnic heights of its varied emotions. It had color and passion in aces.

As for the most well-known variation, the 18th, Paremski's delivery was mesmerizing — a hear-a-pin-drop moment of luxurious listening. And, yes, it's been used in the romantic and weepy film, "Somewhere in Time" with Christopher Reeve and Jane Seymour.

The Williamsburg Symphony Orchestra announced its schedule for the 2022-23 season with new director Michael Buttermann at the helm. (Courtesy of Kim Kiely Photography)

Buttermann skillfully allowed brilliant balance between soloist and orchestra, resulting in a performance that was as perfect as perfect can be.

While Eric Korngold's name is mostly associated by his Hollywood film scores, he was an accomplished concert and opera composer, reportedly admired by Puccini. Such was evident in Theme and Variations. Based on a simple theme with seven variations, its lush lines are gentle in mood and charming and, as Buttermann described it, cinematic. It's playing was appropriately sweeping and lovely.

Closing the affair with a bang was Hindemith's Symphonic Metamorphosis of Themes by Carl Maria von Weber; quite a title. It's a mighty piece of clever creativity with layers and layers of sound and themes running everywhere.

From its somewhat opening off-beat military beat to the spaghetti-like passages running beneath the "Turandot" theme to the warmth of the Andantino, the WSO breezed through the piece with panache and purpose, missing not a beat of intent. As for the dynamite finale with its blaring brass, a high octane ending to a super evening, showcased by Buttermann's impressively clean, crisp and expressive baton.