

Marin Symphony season opener to be a sonic spectacular

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Marin Independent Journal

Article Launched:

It takes musicality and technique to perform the piano concerto by Edvard Grieg, but the Marin Symphony has the star to pull it off, says music director Alasdair Neale. The piece requires skill to showcase what guest artist Orli Shaham refers to as its "heart-on-the-sleeves emotions and virtuosity."

It is this combination of deeply felt emotion and lyrical melodies with fiery technical requirements that has made the concerto an audience favorite since it was first performed in 1869 and it promises to dazzle at the Marin Symphony's season opener Sunday night.

The program features three popular Italian symphonic pieces - Rossini's Overture to the Thieving Magpie and two of Respighi's famed tone poem trilogy, the Fountains of Rome and the Pines of Rome. Nestled between all that Italianate splendor sits Grieg's unpretentious but dramatic piano concerto.

"It's essentially an Italian program with a Norwegian visitor," Neale says.

The Norwegian visitor - Grieg - will be escorted by Israeli }migr} Shaham, who became a U.S. citizen after moving to New York as a child. There, she attended the Juilliard School, where she eventually met Neale. They have since performed together in a number of concerts. During one post-concert conversation, Shaham mentioned that she would like to play the Grieg and Neale took her up on it. "She's terrific," Neale says.

Because of its dashing and dramatic piano part, the concerto is also popular with concert pianists, becoming one of the most frequently played concertos in the repertoire. "When I was a kid, the Grieg was played all over the place," Shaham recalls, adding that it's fun to play and satisfying in the hands.

After such overexposure, though, its popularity in the concert halls waned. So, although she learned the piece as a student, Shaham says she "didn't get a chance to perform it until a few years ago because it was out of fashion."

Unfashionable it may have been for a time, but never outdated. "There's a reason it has stayed in the repertoire," Neale says. "It never outstays its welcome. There are some beautiful melodies. It's a piece you can go out humming."

All season, Neale gives talks before Sunday concerts to help audience members appreciate the music they are about to hear and, this year, the symphony is hosting Tuesday night wrap parties to encourage connection among concertgoers and musicians.

Principal violist and Mill Valley resident Jenny Douglass is looking forward to the post-performance gatherings. "I think the more the audience gets to know the musicians, the more special the concerts become," Douglass says. She's as eager as many to meet Shaham, whose brother Douglass knew at school, and the other visiting artists. "It's going to be a great season with fantastic soloists," she says.

Although some classical performers believe soloists should take liberties in their playing to provide their take on the music, most - like Shaham - believe it is the performer's job to be the composer's advocate. "Our job is to take what the composer intended and bring to life the composer's intention," Shaham says. "I try as much as possible to be in his - Grieg's - mind."

At the time he composed this, his only piano concerto, Grieg was 25 years old and his mind contained a great deal of frustration and personal turmoil. He was struggling with the economic futility of a musical career in Oslo.

In 1868, Grieg had married his cousin, with whom he had a baby girl. That summer, the family moved to the Danish countryside, away from the travails of city living, where Grieg was able to concentrate on his concerto.

Just six weeks after its debut in April the next year, what was to be the Grieg's only child contracted meningitis and died.

Grieving, Grieg and his wife wintered in Rome that year, where they met the great Franz Liszt. Grieg presented the legendary pianist with the complete score to the concerto. Although never having seen the music, Liszt sat at the piano and played both the orchestra and solo parts - including the difficult credenza - perfectly. He then acknowledged Grieg's talent and encouraged him to continue composing, advice that Grieg took to heart.

The concerto became the breakthrough piece that would establish Grieg as a composer and become a favorite of audiences and musicians throughout subsequent generations.

"There's nothing contrived or pretentious about it," Neale says. "It is simply a masterpiece."

IF YOU LISTEN

Who: Pianist Orli Shaham with the Marin Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Alasdair Neale

What: Sonic Spectacular featuring Grieg's Piano Concerto

When: 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 8 and Tuesday, Oct. 10

Where: Marin Veterans Memorial Auditorium at 10 Avenue of the Flags, Civic Center, San Rafael

Opening Night Gala: 5 p.m. Sunday at Marin Center grounds, \$125

Tickets: \$27 to \$65

Information: 499-6800, 479-8100, www.marinsymphony.org, www.ticketmaster.com

Meet the musicians

Pre-concert Conversations: 6:30 p.m. Sundays, with Neale, free

Tuesday Night Wrap Parties: post-concert, Four Points by Sheraton, 1010 Northgate Drive, free

Conductor's Club: post-concert Sundays, green room, \$25

Future concerts

Pianist Paul Smith with the Marin Youth Orchestra, Nov. 5

Violinist Jennifer Koh, Nov. 5 and 7

Pianist Sally Christian, solo recital, Nov. 19 at Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco

Candlelight holiday concert with Chantons, Dec. 2 and 3 at Church of Saint Raphael, 1104 Fifth Ave., San Rafael

Pianist Orion Weiss, Jan. 28 and 30

Clarinetist Todd Palmer, Feb. 25 and 27

The Marin Symphony Chorus and the orchestra, March 25 and 27

Family Concert, April 22

Soprano Rebecca Evans, April 29 and May 1