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Review: California Symphony opens season with acrobats

By Sue Gilmore
Contra Costa Times

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Pity the poor piano soloist fated to be the following act to a pair of brawny, bare-chested Russian acrobats whose onstage exertions draw a standing ovation from a wowed crowd.

But San Jose native son Jon Nakamatsu did it with aplomb Sunday afternoon in Walnut Creek's Leshner Center for the Arts, playing the beloved Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor to help conductor Barry Jekowsky and the California Symphony open their 22nd concert season.

Nakamatsu, 40, is the former high school German teacher who skyrocketed into a career as a pianist by winning the Tenth Annual Van Cliburn International Competition in 1997. His rendering of the Rachmaninoff, especially in its languorously beautiful second and rhythmically pounding third movements, gave ample demonstration of why that career is now, if not spectacular, so solid and assured.

But back to those acrobats — Iouri Safranov and the bald-headed, Atlas-like Nikolai Melnikov, circus-trained athletes with experience in Ringling Bros. and Cirque du Soleil, respectively, who formed a duo act a couple of years ago. Hired by Jekowsky for a similar gig with the Reno Philharmonic last year, they were brought to the Leshner stage Sunday, clad only in fiery orange and yellow tights, to lend interpretive "body sculpture" to the symphony's

performance of Samuel Barber's mournful Adagio for Strings. And while their excruciatingly slow movements, executed with power, grace and control, were sometimes jaw-droppingly impressive, it is safe to say that Barber's intensely throbbing passages lent more to the acrobatics than the acrobatics lent to the music.

The Barber work, which opened the program, is less than 9 minutes in length. So it seemed strange to have to sit silently for a full 10 minutes for the string players to vacate the stage while the piano was hauled up and a too-small cadre of workers got busy ordering and reordering chairs on the stage.

Nakamatsu, however, ultimately made the wait worthwhile. A slight and elegantly graceful performer, he began the opening Allegro in a brisk but not hurried tempo, giving it a somewhat dispassionate reading that seemed to emphasize precision rather than persuasiveness. It was almost as if he were watching from above rather than immersing himself in the music.

Any trepidation about a dearth of passion, however, dissolved as the inherent lyricism developed and was entirely dissipated in the gorgeous second movement. It was in this Intermezzo and Adagio that Nakamatsu's keen powers of articulation were married to an exquisitely expressive outpouring of emotion. Fingers of velvet-tipped steel in rapid-fire passagework at the top of the keyboard kept up a rat-a-tat drilling with astonishing accuracy.

The Finale, with Jekowsky and an amply effective orchestra in full support, was brilliantly propulsive, driving to a pounding conclusion with clarity, fervor and force. Following a huge ovation and three curtain calls, the soloist favored the audience with a thoroughly impressive encore, Mendelssohn's "Rondo capriccioso."

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Antonin Dvorak's most famous symphony, the No. 9 in E minor, followed an intermission rendered a bit lengthy by a crowded CD-signing session with Nakamatsu in the lobby. And while the Adagio that opened it lurched and lumbered a bit, hobbled by oddly truncated phrasing that interrupted a sense of flow, things got more organic and inevitable in the blossoming Largo that followed. Most notable here, besides the beautifully balanced swellings and subsidences of the full orchestra, was English horn player Jessica Boelter's recurring solo — long, warm, vibrant lines of melody executed with superb breath control. The Scherzo was a fierce bundle of energy, with a tremendous sense of forward drive, and Jekowsky didn't let a second elapse, launching from it into the concluding Allegro con fuoco with its blasts from the brass chorale. Things for the most part went well here, too, although they were marred at the end by the conductor's pushing the tempo to a punishing level at the penultimate orchestral climax, only to return to an exaggeratedly slow conclusion that smacked of mawkishness.

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Concert Review WHAT: Pianist Jon Nakamatsu and the California Symphony play works by Rachmaninoff, Barber and Dvorak WHERE: Leshher Center for the Arts, Civic Drive at Locust Street, Walnut Creek WHEN: 7:30 tonight Tickets: \$20-\$59; 925-943-7469 or www.lesherartscenter.org

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