

Speck, Chicago Philharmonic deliver a fierce Tchaikovsky Fourth

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By Gerald Fisher



Scott Speck conducted the Chicago Philharmonic Sunday night in Evanston.

The Chicago Philharmonic concert Sunday night at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall was both flamboyant and fulfilling, crowned with music director Scott Speck's sizzling take on Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4.

The opening work, *Chasing the Sun*, by John David Earnest was an orchestral barnburner, short and splashy. Written in 1987, it exhibits a brash American idiom, rhythmically impulsive with an ardent melodic interlude showing off the strings before returning to the driving orchestral music. Stylistically the work could have dated from any time in the last half century and seemed calculated to display the ensemble's proficiency in a brilliant virtuoso showpiece.

The orchestra was cut back to Classical proportions for a traversal of Beethoven's "Triple" Concerto, Op. 56, for violin, cello and piano. Beethoven's 1804 work is more elegant and restrained than most of his essays in the genre, and the Chicago-based Lincoln Trio took on the solo parts with a unity born of their long association.



Lincoln Trio

David Cunliffe's cello was a standout from the start. After the dark opening he took the first solo broadly, followed by the violin and eventually the piano. Desiree Ruhstrat's violin sounded a bit thin by comparison but was always stylish and engaged. Marta Aznavoorian managed the piano's runs and arpeggios with ease.

The second movement—really a slow introduction to the Finale—showed off the trio's complementary sound in solo and duet. The third movement offered a brighter melodic theme and opportunities for speedy passagework and humorous interplay among the soloists.

At times the soloists were somewhat overwhelmed by the orchestra, which boasted a full complement of strings, but for the most part Speck maintained a discreet balance which allowed the soloists the spotlight when called upon.

After a brief spoken introduction, Speck led the orchestra in a gripping performance of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony that never let up. His musicians were with him all the way in this deeply emotional work—alert and responsive to the aggressive tempos and extreme flashes that punctuate the work's four movements.

The opening "Fate" motif that opens and closes the piece was delivered so strongly that it seemed to represent all the intensity that was to come in this insistent and unrelenting performance. One could only marvel at the bravura passages as they roared past.

And yet the passages of Tchaikovsky's melodic invention were not lost, underlaid by foreboding dark rhythms that came to the fore with a sense of inevitability. Speck brought out the Russian soul that informs the Andantino movement with its singing melodies that are still full of tragedy.

The Philharmonic musicians were also on top of the technically challenging Pizzicato third movement. But it was the Finale that sealed the deal with this performance. The opening clash was dauntingly fierce and the playing that followed reflected the power and tragedy that followed.

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