Chicago Philharmonic turns a corner with “Turning Points” program

By Wynne Delacoma

Mon Nov 16, 2015 at 12:34 pm

Scott Speck conducted the Chicago Philharmonic Sunday night in Evanston.

Judging from the first concert of the Chicago Philharmonic’s new season Sunday night in Evanston’s Pick-Staiger Concert Hall, all seems to be well in the orchestra’s particular corner of the world.

Conducted by Scott Speck, its artistic director since 2013, the program of works by Schubert, Brahms and the contemporary Polish composer Wojiech Kilar brimmed with verve and insight. The audience was large and attentive, and five young string...
players from the orchestra’s Side by Side program joined the Philharmonic for one of the works, Schubert’s Symphony No. 8 (Unfinished). Speck offered engaging, concise commentary from the stage, and before the concert Chicago’s Lira Singers performed several Polish songs in the Pick-Staiger lobby as a complement to Kilar’s zesty, folk-tinged Little Overture.

Orchestras throughout the country are desperately seeking new ways to engage with audiences, and in recent seasons Chicago Philharmonic seems to have found a path to that elusive goal.

The concert’s theme was “Turning Points,” and in his commentary Speck described each piece as a crucial development point in its composer’s career. Written in 1955 when he was only 23, Kilar’s Little Overture was the first high-profile orchestral piece for a composer who would become internationally known for film scores. Speck saw Schubert struggling with his own mortality in the Unfinished Symphony and Brahms finally breaking through his composer’s block about orchestral writing with the Piano Concerto No. 1. The performances by Speck and the Philharmonic proved his points in all three works.

Robert McDonald

With Robert McDonald as a compelling piano soloist, Speck underscored Brahms’ confident orchestral writing in this full-throated concerto, but also the darkness that lurks in the composer’s dense harmonies and poignant melodic turns. The orchestra reveled in the monumental scope of the concerto’s opening pages, allowing the music’s lush, romantic majesty room to breathe. McDonald was especially fearless in the concerto’s vigorous moments, riding both the orchestral waves and Brahms’ torrents of tightly packed chords with passionate precision. In the Adagio, he had the audience hanging on every pause and spare, luminous note of Brahms’ wistful theme.

The Chicago Philharmonic’s gifted woodwind soloists were on full display in Schubert’s Symphony No. 8. Principal players Linda Baker, clarinet; Anne Bach, oboe, and Mary Stolper, flute spun out the first movement’s ominous phrases in long, undulating lines tinged with danger and melancholy. The cellos brought a quiet intimacy to the singing second theme.

The mood was entirely different in Kilar’s Little Overture, rambunctious and cheerful, with woodwinds and strings madly galloping amid the steadily puffing brass. The angular melodies and syncopated rhythms brought Prokofiev to mind.

Acknowledging Friday night’s terrorist massacre in Paris, Speck opened the evening with a tender performance of Ravel’s Pavane for a Dead Princess.
Chicago Philharmonic traces its origins to 1979, and the orchestra has had its troubles over the years—disbanding for a while, renaming itself, battling and ultimately resolving financial problems. Now run by its players with the help of a strong board and staff, those troubles seem to be behind it. A major musical center like Chicago needs as many ambitious, thriving orchestras as it can get. May Chicago Philharmonic continue to prosper.

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