

# Astonishing Rachmaninoff elevates Cal Phil performance

By John Farrell Correspondent

If it wasn't the first time a bagpipe band had been heard in the confines of acoustically perfect Disney Hall, it was certainly one of the first.

The bagpipe, that Scottish instrument that was as often used to scare the enemy (the English, for nearly a millennium, and then various native tribesmen during the reign of the British Empire) as to play music, has a volume that reaches a long way. Bring a half a dozen together, along with assorted drummers, and you have a big noise.

The Cabar Feidh Pipe Band marched into Disney Hall as part of the California Philharmonic's third pair of summer concerts on Sunday.

Saturday, the group joined the orchestra outdoors at the Los Angeles County Arboretum and Botanical Garden. (Sunday afternoon's performance is reviewed here.) It was a spectacularly visual way to celebrate the concert Maestro Victor Vener called "Swords and Chivalry" because of the many selections from films like "Braveheart" and "Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves."

The real musical excitement, though, has nothing to do with historic romance or not-particularly memorable film selections. It was "Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini" by Rachmaninoff, with pianist

Robert Thies as soloist, one of those performances that sticks in the memory, and that leaves you physically moved and enchanted long after it ends. It was on a different level from the rest of the program: astonishing, powerful and delicate by turns, informed by Thies's technical brilliance, expressive fingers and delightful use of rubato.

Thies, a gold medal winner in 1996 at the Second International Prokofiev Competition, recently performed with the Pasadena Symphony. Sunday afternoon, he took the stage not in orchestral black and white but in an elegant tan suit with a bright red-orange tie. It was clearly a statement that the pianist was his own man: formal, but different.

The Rachmaninoff "Rhapsody" is a familiar piece, but under Thies's fingers, it took on a new color, revealing details that usually remain hidden, from tricks of virtuoso pianism to lush new richness and gentle hints at deeper meanings.

Vener and his orchestra were inspired by Thies to a new level themselves, and the results were electric.

Thies hides his extraordinary brilliance behind a bright smile and the looks of the grown-up boy next door. But he plays this work the way Rachmaninoff, who made

his living as a pianist, must have played it.

The rest of the program did not come near the Rachmaninoff. The two pieces of film music, Michael Kamen's main title music for "Robin Hood" was little more than forgettable fluff, and two pieces from James Horner's score for "Braveheart" seemed to charm only those who knew the movie. Better was a selection of tunes from Lerner and Loewe's "Camelot" in a bright arrangement by Bennett. It featured familiar tunes and a generous reading by the orchestra.

The regular concert ended with two pieces by Wagner, the Prelude and Love Death from "Tristan and Isolde" and the Prelude to Act III from "Lohengrin." Both were played with adequate technique by the orchestra but, since the band on stage wasn't the monster that Wagner calls for, the music simply lacked the force and power the composer expected. Call it "Wagner light."

Cabar Feidh joined the orchestra for "Scotland the Brave" and returned for a set of highland dances (sans dancers) and a final encore from the Disney Hall choir loft. The proved that bagpipes can fit into the classical world.

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