

Varied, challenging fare opens BSO's 40th season: www.heraldtimesonline.com

By Peter Jacobi
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The more official celebration won't come until next month. That's when the founding conductor, Geoffrey Simon, returns for a working visit. But the Bloomington Symphony Orchestra got its 40th season effectively under way Saturday evening with a program of varied and challenging fare in the Bloomington High School North auditorium.

The orchestra's current music director, Charles Latshaw, was in charge, very much so, and he had invited Maxim Bernard to solo in the Schumann A Minor Piano Concerto, this between two vigorous sets of dances, those from the ballet "Estancia" by Alberto Ginastera and those called Polovtsian, from the opera "Prince Igor" by Alexander Borodin.

Bernard, a gifted Canadian who has been studying with Menahem Pressler at the IU Jacobs School, impressed with a clearly enunciated, technically proficient and poetic performance. Schumann's concerto was written for his beloved wife, Clara. Its slow movements strongly suggest the composer's infatuation, so rhapsodic and profusely lyrical are they. The allegros call for exceptional keyboard skills, Schumann's gift to Clara as a pianist of repute in her time. Bernard, an artist and craftsman, caught the emotional aspects of the score and conquered the mechanical demands.

Though the BSO's partnership with the soloist had its tentative moments, the collaboration, in total, worked well enough to give the music flavor and form.

Rehearsal emphasis must have gone to the Ginastera and Borodin dance collections. They were played with greater cohesiveness and terrific gusto, bearing the mark of strong self-motivation and conductor Latshaw's firm and intuitive leadership.

In the dances from "Estancia," particularly, the orchestra made itself proud. This paeon to the gauchos, the cowboys, of Ginastera's native Argentina reflects the broad landscape of the pampas, the loneliness of gaucho life and the frenzy that powers their day. The music is brash and evocative, qualities the orchestra nobly met.

The Polovtsian dances unfold in the second act of Borodin's opera as the Tartars in 12th century Russia regale Prince Igor, their prisoner, with a lavish feast. The score contains exotic colors, undulating and slashing rhythms and a couple of haunting melodies. All these, Latshaw and orchestra worked very hard to capture. The performance heard was bold and distinctively stylistic.