

Review: Ward Stare leads RPO in impassioned work, world premiere

Jann Nyffeler 3:06 p.m. ET Jan. 27, 2017



(Photo: Devon Cass)

If you really want to know what oppression sounds like, don't miss the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra this week.

And if you want to hear what the fight against oppression sounds like, there is nothing more inspiring than hearing the RPO perform Dmitri Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony*.

Thursday night, Music Director Ward Stare directed the orchestra in one of his most impassioned performances yet. It was his orchestra, without a doubt, as he led the musicians with a focus and fury that brought out the best in every section. You'll get another chance to hear them when they repeat the program Saturday evening at Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre.

Elliot Goldenthal's new work, *Waltz and Agitato*, "*Pravda*," [had its world premiere as part of the program.](http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/lifestyle/2017/01/19/oscar-winning-film-composer-has-world-premiere-rpo/96770988/) ([/story/lifestyle/2017/01/19/oscar-winning-film-composer-has-world-premiere-rpo/96770988/](http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/lifestyle/2017/01/19/oscar-winning-film-composer-has-world-premiere-rpo/96770988/)) With its wicked pizzicato in the low strings and a driving march from the snare drum, it immediately established the

contemplative vibe for the evening. Naturally, the work had a bit of a film score sensibility to it, given Goldenthal's success with writing music for movies such as *Frida* and *Alien 3*, among others.

But this work for orchestra stands just fine on its own. With intensity and power — spiced up with a freaky little waltz and chattiness in the violins and violas — Goldenthal has created a window into political conflict. Of course, he's master of musical suspense, but the work isn't as brooding as the title might imply. It was a compelling introduction to the evening.

[Oscar-winning film composer has world premiere with RPO](http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/lifestyle/2017/01/19/oscar-winning-film-composer-has-world-premiere-rpo/96770988/)
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Next, soprano Nicole Cabell, the soloist in Ravel's *Shéhérazade*, instantly demanded our attention.

Last year saw Cabell, a graduate of the Eastman School of Music, performing around the world at venues including the Royal Opera House in London, the Cincinnati Opera and the Atlanta Opera. Recently she has sung with symphony orchestras in Hiroshima, Japan; Nashville, Tennessee; Baltimore; and Sydney.

The orchestra backed her up effortlessly Thursday, with moments like an endearing duet with the concertmaster, a beautiful handoff from solo horn to viola, and magical pianissimo timpani at the end of the first movement.

She is precisely what you want in a soprano, so expressive and articulate. Even though she sang in the composition's original French, she's such a great storyteller that any potential language barrier was fleeting. Her inflection and demeanor, sometimes soothing, sometimes inquisitive, conveyed the story to perfection.

Shéhérazade ultimately created a life-affirming balance to Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5 in D Minor*, Op. 47. Even if you don't know much about Russian history, this work, written in 1937, undeniably captures a culture struggling to persevere in a brutal dictatorship. You can sense it from the shrill notes of the first violins to the mysterious, delicate pizzicato in the cellos and basses. It's a very visual symphony, in that you're likely to see in your mind's eye precisely what the composer wanted you to see. It's dour and depressing, frankly, but it has moments of great triumph, too. A horn and flute duet creates light and hopefulness. A masterful pairing of celeste and trumpet underscores another delicate struggle.

The orchestra is huge here, with the stage jam-packed with as many musicians as it can hold. It's a brazen and dramatic work that says this is what classical music is all about; this is why we chase it, for the rewards that it brings.

You might say that Shostakovich was playing the crafty sycophant to Stalin in the parts that sound almost stereotypically Russian — give 'em what they want, but subtly come back with your own message to underscore your own reality. Intense vigor in the basses and cellos gave way to a sweet little waltz from the horns and woodwinds. A country dance from the violins led to epic work from the brass. Throw in a cheery violin solo with a delightful transition to the woodwinds, a silly glissando from the pair of harps, and a phalanx of bassoons and you've got one happy dictator.

In the third movement, the orchestra mastered the art of intense yet quiet playing. It created a gripping sense of fear and sadness that couldn't be ameliorated even by the harps and flutes. Stare was at his best Thursday night, imploring his orchestra to tell Shostakovich's story, to feel it, and pass that sensation along to the audience.

The final movement begins with killer brass and a brutal repetition in the violins. It's the height of relentlessness and monotony — but then the harp steals the line and gives the work a sliver of hope.

The conclusion is so beautifully overwhelming, you'll want to have tissues handy.

Jann Nyffeler, a Rochester-based freelance journalist, is a recovering violinist who began her classical music career at WCPE-FM in North Carolina.

Things to do: Winterfest, comedy, concerts

(<http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/lifestyle/entertainment/2017/01/26/10-things-do-winterfest-comedy-concerts/96783852/>)

If you go

What: The Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, performing the world concert premiere of *Waltz and Agitato*, "Pravda," by Elliot Goldenthal; *Shéhérazade* by Maurice Ravel, featuring soprano Nicole Cabell; and Symphony No. 5 by Dmitri Shostakovich. Music Director Ward Stare conducts.

When: 8 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 28.

Where: Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre, Rochester.

Tickets: \$23-103. Go to [rpo.org](http://www.rpo.org). (http://www.rpo.org/p_2128/Stare_Conducts_Shostakovich_5/) or call (585) 454-2100, at most Wegmans locations and at the RPO Patron Services Center, 108 East Ave.

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