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A lively Beethoven concerto opens Fairfax Symphony Orchestra season

By Joan Reinthaler, September 20, 2015

A terrific performance of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 in E flat, Op. 73 ("Emperor"), lit up the Fairfax Symphony Orchestra's season-opening concert at the George Mason Center for the Arts on Saturday. The orchestra is featuring all five of his piano concertos in this year's programming and, perhaps to prime the audience for a season of Beethoven discourse, the concerto was framed by his Coriolan Overture and his Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, Op. 67.

Alon Goldstein was the soloist. A graduate of the Peabody Institute at Johns Hopkins University, where he studied with Leon Fleisher, **Goldstein is a huge man with an astonishingly delicate touch. His knees may not fit under the piano keyboard, but his hands flew over it, finding shades of attacks and broadenings in the midst of clouds of runs, all navigated with gorgeous transparency.** His tempos may have been moderate, but even the calm reverie of the concerto's Adagio second movement never lost a sense of momentum. His before-intermission encore — a short, rhythmically intricate dance by Alberto Ginastera — was full of sophisticated humor and fun.

Conductor Christopher Zimmerman and his orchestra were in early season form, better at energy and color than at details. In the concerto, the orchestra tended to play at the back end of the beat, ceding alacrity to security, but it did a good job of powering up big climaxes with excitement and drama, and the crashing chords that open the Overture were a fine season curtain-raiser. And although the symphony sounded underrehearsed, the fact that so many details of phrasing and ensemble were so notably improved the second time around, during repeats, bodes well for the season ahead.

Alon Goldstein