

BPO, Weiss capture Gershwin spirit

By HERMAN TROTTER

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The BPO's Gershwin Festival concludes this weekend with a program featuring his 1925 Piano Concerto in F, one of the greatest American masterpieces.

Gershwin thought of this work as pure music, but he grew up in New York during the teens and 1920s, and his concerto is clearly an urban landscape, redolent of the city's dance rhythms, street sounds, blues evocations, rhapsodic yearnings and other flavors. In particular it radiates the rattling, rolling rhythms and clickety-clack lyricism of the "El," the city's now-vanished elevated railways.

Opening with its bold timpani declamation, Friday's performance caught the spirit of the music with great fidelity, while pianist Orion Weiss' first entrance, wonderfully soft, pliant and reflective, was a further

in a theme of lush, almost Puccinian beauty that climaxes satisfyingly, then slips back into a sea of glimmering, shimmering moonlit reverie, returning to the harp-toned opening silence. The composer was on hand to receive the audience's warm response to this very appealing music.

Gershwin's 1932 Second Rhapsody was given the same sort of spirited performance by Weiss and the orchestra as in the concerto.

The concert closed with William Schuman's 1954 "New England Triptych," settings of three old hymn tunes by William Billings.



Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News

Pianist Orion Weiss returns for the second half of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra's Gershwin festival this weekend.

CONCERT REVIEW

Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra

Gershwin Festival with conductor JoAnn Falletta, plus "Arc of Visibility" by Philip Rothman. Part of the Classics Series. Friday morning and 8 p.m. today in Kleinhans Music Hall. For tickets, call 885-5000.

harbinger of good things. His enticing loose-limbed phrasing was mirrored in the accompanying orchestral counterpoint. Weiss obviously had all the technique necessary, but clearly understood that Gershwin's music is primarily evocative, and not a virtuoso showcase.

The unique, soulful blues atmosphere of the slow movement was superbly introduced by Alex Jokipii's muted trumpet musings, and carried along by haunting hollow woodwind responses and the crisp observations by pianist Weiss. The Finale, the most unbridled and jazzy movement, is rhythm-dominated and continued the intuitive, exciting interplay among Music Director JoAnn Falletta, Weiss and the orchestra, concluding with an appropriate timpani reminder of where the concerto had started.

The program was not all Gershwin. It opened with another, quite different piece of atmospheric music, the 2009 "Arc of Visibility" by Buffalo-born Philip Rothman. Inspired by photographs of moonlit seascapes, the music slowly rises out of silence with a series of string-harp murmurings that lead to gradual appearance of half-formed mottos and ruminative ostinato figures. There were also stormlike percussion bursts and other inventive devices that follow each other logically. They eventually coalesce