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Gimmicky razzmatazz adds wow to Philharmonia season opener

By William Dart
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The first concert of the season is always an occasion, and Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra's Thursday concert was no exception. Its title, Exhibition Opening, was a nod to the Mussorgsky work that presided over a predominantly Russian programme cleverly pitched to welcome old friends and new punters. Conductor Ekehard Stier has a soft spot for John Corigliano, and the American composer's *The Mannheim Rocket* came with a wow quotient guaranteed to make audiences prepare for a G-force experience. Compressing a century or more of Austro-German music into 11 minutes of orchestral razzmatazz, Corigliano conscripts everything from the sound of breaking glass and Theremin wail to pepped-up Brahms and a stentorian aside from Wagner's *Mastersingers*. Outrageously gimmicky, it was the perfect vehicle to flaunt the superb form of the players, primed and eager for a bumper year ahead.

It was also the perfect teaser for what was to follow: Eugene Mursky's debut in Prokofiev's popular *Third Piano Concerto*. While the Russian pianist can fire out semiquavers with mind-blurring speed and accuracy, it was a performance that went beyond vertiginous velocity. An espressivo theme was an elegantly voiced nod to Rachmaninov, against sighs of muted strings. Stier fashioned the second movement as a showcase for the piquant, chiselled woodwind playing that was the order of the evening; later, a rapturous nocturne had Mursky soaring effortlessly above the orchestra.

Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* was presented in the celebrated Ravel transcription with its very Gallic blend of chic and choc. Among solo turns, Brent Grapes' trumpet was noble and true while Steve Miles' tenor tuba lent a plaintive lyricism to "Bydlo", although Australian Jason Xanthoudakis' sleek saxophone lines in "The Old Castle" were curiously shaved of some grace notes. The orchestra, whether bustling around markets, exploring mysterious catacombs or evoking the architectural magnificence of Kiev's Great Gate, was magnificent. One brickbat: It was a brilliant touch to have Philip Trusttum's paintings, based on the same images that inspired Mussorgsky, on display, although more care should have been taken with a circulated leaflet in which the canvases were scrappily reproduced.

One bouquet: Corigliano's atmospheric *Campane di Ravello*, a sonorous birthday tribute to the late Sir Georg Solti, proved a timely encore, celebrating the APO's 30th year of being a core provider of both the city's and entire country's music.

What: **Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra**. Where: **Auckland Town Hall**.
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