

## Jay Harvey Upstage

Tuesday, April 25, 2017

### 1998 IVCI Laureate Svetlin Roussev returns for a recital capped by music from his native Bulgaria



*Svetlin Roussev and Chih-Yi Chen evinced a well-honed musical partnership*

The patrician manner that Svetlin Roussev displayed in Schubert's Sonatina in D major, D. 384, stood him in good stead for the much different second work on his recital program Tuesday with pianist Chih-Yi Chen at the Indiana History Center.

The late romantic flowering evident in Eugene Ysaye's Sonata No. 2 for Solo Violin ("Obsession") requires some reining in to help clarify its debts to both J.S. Bach and the "Dies irae" chant melody beloved of several composers. There's more than a glance backward in the "obsession" the four-movement piece has with those two sources. So for all its outside virtuosity, scrupulously clean playing helps enormously. This is very rooted music, and that quality alone makes it seem obsessive.

Tidy yet amply expressive playing is what Roussev, a laureate in the 1998 International Violin Competition of Indianapolis, demonstrated consistently in a program that went from Schubert and Ysaye through bonbons by Tchaikovsky and a substantial French violin-piano sonata to Pancho Vladigerov's "Song" and "Rhapsody Vardar."

Roussev champions music from his native Bulgaria, and Vladigerov is regarded as his most eminent countryman among composers. "Song" has the pentatonic flavor familiar to music-lovers from the folk-influenced music of the Hungarian Bela Bartok. In this performance, Roussev and Chen made the most of its flamboyant climax (which ventures far outside the folk inspiration), moving from there to settle down in well-coordinated fashion. The composer at his most flagrantly patriotic was represented by "Vardar," a showpiece requiring seemingly unstoppable fast fiddling, with lots of rapid tremolo passages and a general atmosphere of dancing ecstasy.

The "wow" factor of the rhapsody helped account for the return of the duo for an encore, another Bulgarian piece: "Sevdana," by Georgi Zlatov-Cherkin.

As for the excellence of the duo earlier, Gabriel Fauré's Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 1 in A major, op. 13, gave extended evidence of a solid partnership. I would have preferred a hair less swiftness in the "Allegro vivo" movement, which would have brought out its charm more and not so conspicuously challenged the duo's togetherness.

The other three movements were unexceptionable in their display of unity and interpretive elan. The chromatic surges in the opening movement were passionately well-judged. Dynamics were wonderfully coordinated in the slow movement, especially near the end, with its relaxed diminuendo passages. The tension generated in the finale before the final outburst indicated how well the two musicians were of one mind about the score and its intended effect.

Not overlooking the excellence of Chen's contributions, I want to concentrate particularly on the violinist for the remainder of this post. His articulation was immaculate in the Ysaye sonata. The string crossings were clean; the near-ferocity of those phrases remained under control. It was admirable how Roussev seemed to place the Bach quotes within parentheses, as if setting the table for a lavish feast. Similarly, the frequent tweaking of "Dies irae" throughout projected the melody well without overshadowing its surroundings.

The chordal suggestions in the third movement Sarabande were firm and well-voiced; the near-the-bridge phrases in the finale had just the right wraith-like tone. This was an "Obsession" that found that quality in the music without having to convey the impression that the performer was obsessed to the point of mania. In both the way he carries himself and his mastery of a wealth of violin technique, Roussev bears fair comparison with Jascha Heifetz.

Tchaikovsky's *Melodie* in E-flat major, *Valse Sentimentale*, and *Valse-Scherzo* underscored that patrician manner mentioned earlier, with hand-in-glove accompaniments from Chen. His ardent low-register tone in the "Melodie" was exquisite. In none of the three pieces did Roussev feel the need to give way to anything schmaltzy. His studied but never stiff approach to these lovely pieces still gave him lots of elbow room for putting across their instant appeal. And the audience responded with obvious joy.