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Young soloist melds beautifully with Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra

BY DAVID N. DUNKLE

Two oft-played but perhaps still under-appreciated works and the superlative skills of a gifted young pianist highlighted the final Masterworks programs of the season for Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra.

As they have all season, conductor Stuart Malina and his HSO musicians performed splendidly Saturday night at The Forum in downtown Harrisburg, mastering every nook and cranny of complex works by British composer Ralph Vaughn Williams and German Robert Schumann, with a sparkling confection from French-born Hector Berlioz thrown in as an appetizer.

The program, "Tales of Two Cities," will be repeated today at 3 p.m. at The Forum.

Berlioz's Roman Carnival Overture provided a nice mood-setter, with its racy tempo that evokes galloping horses. It's a happy-go-lucky piece that features tambourines and trumpets urging on violas, flutes and clarinets.

Then guest soloist Daria Rabotkina, winner of the 2007 Concert Artists Guild International Competition, joined HSO for a daring attack on Schumann's influential Piano Concerto in A minor, which was first performed in 1846.

The Russian-born Rabotkina, who sometimes plays with her nose mere inches from the keyboard, brings a sophistication beyond her years to bear, respecting the quiet spots in Schumann's fine piece but going full bore with exceptional technique when that is needed. Her approach melded well with the typical style of Malina, who is at his best when navigating musical currents both subtle and strong.

Schumann's piano concerto, the only one he composed, is played without pause during the final two movements, creating a long, virtuostic march for both pianist and orchestra to an exciting finale.

After the intermission, HSO tackled Vaughn Williams' Symphony No. 2, called "A London Symphony." This superlative symphonic poem, which premiered in 1914, is dedicated to the rhythms of life in the London of his day, when the raucous energy of the Industrial Revolution coexisted with the burbling simplicity of the river Thames. Quiet passages in the four-movement work suddenly soar into crescendos, while Vaughn Williams weaves beautiful and elegant melodies throughout.

Vaughn Williams (1872-1958) composed his best-known works in the 20th century, but in many respects was a 19th century composer, heavily influenced by the Romanticism of that era. He is dismissed by some as a composer of orchestral "elevator music," but that undervalues his ear for melody and his subtle skill at weaving themes. The word that comes to mind with Vaughn Williams is patience, and again that plays right into the hands of Malina and HSO.

His wonderful second symphony reveals itself slowly, but is a rewarding investment for the unhurried listener. The same can be said for HSO, which over the past three seasons has performed with a beautiful consistency. Today's concert at The Forum marks the end of Malina's 10th season as music director — and the 80th for the orchestra itself.