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Young artists dazzle with passion, energy

By Gwenda Nemerofsky

Orchestral music lovers often fret about the future of the genre, concerned interest and involvement is waning. Friday nights Winnipeg Symphony Orchestras Masterworks concert put some of this worry to rest.

Two young artists headlined the performance: 33-year-old Canadian conductor Julian Kuerti and 27-year old Russian pianist Daria Rabotkina. Their combined talent, poise, technical prowess and stage presence assured us that the future of the music we love shines as brightly as ever.

Both have distinctive pedigrees. Kuerti is the son of acclaimed Canadian musicians pianist Anton Kuerti and cellist Christine Bogyo. Rabotkina's parents are pianists Guzel Abdoullina and Sergei Rabotkin. Kuerti is assistant conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Rabotkina is forging a bright international career.

They took us on a breathtaking evening of American and French music of the twentieth century. It's hard to beat Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, with its captivating melodies and catchy dance beats.

The *Symphonic Dances* are the next best thing to the musical itself and Kuerti's nuanced direction brought the orchestra to new heights of style, with spunky brass portraying the Jets and the Sharks.

Somewhere flowed directly from Kuerti's sweeping arms to Dan Scholz's viola, as he lovingly introduced the bittersweet melody. Total involvement reigned: Musicians snapped their fingers, yelled, "Mambo!" and played with passion.

Rabotkina amazed us in Ravel's *Piano Concerto in D Major for Left Hand*. Written for pianist Paul Wittgenstein who had lost his right arm, it opens with ominous rumbling from double basses and contrabassoon. Rabotkina played with feverish intensity and physicality, often gripping the piano's edge.

Orchestral interludes had monumental presence and Rabotkina showed great range of expression, imparting silken delicacy, contrasted later by driving energy. If we hadn't seen it with our own eyes, we would never have known she was playing with one hand. The cadenza, with its ingenious writing and shrewd pedaling, enhanced the voicing, providing deceiving fullness.

As a testament to her startling versatility, Rabotkina then tackled George Gershwin's iconic *Rhapsody in Blue*. Kuerti massaged it for all it was worth. From the opening slither of the clarinet to the final triumphant note, this was exhilarating, bursting with humour and life.

Rabotkina's touch adapted seamlessly to each phrase from fluid and subtle to powerful and assertive. She has an internal sense of the music, capturing the jazz flavour and playing from the heart. You can't ask for much more.