

Symphony review: DSSO's 'Genesis' opener provides musical big bang

By [Lawrance Bernabo, for the News Tribune](#) on Sep 13, 2015 at 5:58 p.m.

The 2015-16 "Gods & Myths" season of the Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra began at the very beginning, with a program titled "Genesis" at DECC Symphony Hall on Saturday night. Building on last season's strong finish, Dirk Meyer and company hit the ground running.

First, it must be said that whether it is because of Friday's anniversary, the acoustics of the hall or the number of members of the DSSO chorus in attendance, Saturday night's symphony audience did an exceptional job of singing the national anthem.

Miguel del Aguila's "Caribeña" provided a spicy appetizer at the start of the evening. This contemporary work starts off with Latin percussions – establishing rhythm as a key common denominator between the works on the program – with the brass section in Big Band mode.

Things got a little muddle in the middle in terms of being able to follow the musical progression as del Aguila builds the piece, but by the time the horns take off their mutes everything came together in a spirited, escalating crescendo.

Then the stage was set for guest pianist Alexander Korsantia and Sergei Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major. Korsantia returned to Duluth, having performed a program of Beethoven piano pieces and his signature showcase, Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition," at a 2014 Matinee Musicale concert.

The opening clarinet established the initial theme, turned lush and gorgeous by the full orchestra, before the strings start humming and Korsantia started pounding away at the piano. Literally. During the first movement his right hand was flying off the keyboard at the end of the glissandos. There was a nice build to the restated theme by the orchestra, and Korsantia responded with notes that had an aching quality to them. He built on that in the next part of the opening movement, with dazzling runs up and down the keyboard. Then Korsantia provided thunder, hammering home a giant chord, before going with another display of lighting over the keys. The movement ended with a big bang that had the audience gasping.

Prokofiev's predilection for dissonance in the Second Movement's second theme, certainly plays to Korsantia's strong suit. I thought his touch was a bit too light in the ethereal fourth variation, but delightfully playful in the fifth.

In the Third Movement we again have the orchestra developing lush themes, as beautiful as you will find in a piano concerto, before the pianist rips them to shreds. Korsantia really delivered the big finish. I have heard more than one soloist be overwhelmed by the orchestra in the concerto's end game, but that certainly did not happen here.

Meyer provided a mini-musical appreciation lesson to set up Robert Schumann's Symphony No. 4 in D minor, explaining its place as a signature piece in the history of the symphony and allowing the conductor to talk about his hometown of Düsseldorf, Germany.

The DSSO previously has played both Schumann's revised version and the original version in days past, but the program notes explained that this performance would be in Gustav Mahler's orchestration. About two minutes into the opening movement it was clear why Meyer picked that version.

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This provided the big, bold sound that Meyer prefers, with strong rhythmic sensibilities and a sharp clarity that was in many ways the antithesis to what we heard in the first half of the evening. The orchestra seamlessly went from one movement to the next, as the composer intended.

The opening movement was the most dynamic, with the second featuring a nice little violin solo by Erin Aldridge. I also liked the rhythmic onslaught of the scherzo in the third, while the entire horn section shone in the final movement, as Meyer again displayed his facility for bringing a sense of vitality to the works his orchestra is performing.

This is something that will never grow old.

On Tuesday the DSSO debuts its chamber music series at the Depot with a program devoted to the magic of strings. Then on Oct. 3, Frances Gumm, formerly of Grand Rapids, will be making her DSSO debut in a performance of the comic operetta "The Wizard of Oz."

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