

Buffalo Philharmonic holds concerts with Russian pianist Alexander Malofeev

David Walsh
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In the face of the current eruption of anti-Russian sentiment, at least one musical organization in North America has demonstrated some courage. The Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra (BPO) in Buffalo, New York went ahead with planned performances by Russian pianist Alexander Malofeev, along with associated events, on March 4 and 5.

Malofeev's scheduled appearances in Vancouver and Montreal in Canada on the same North American tour were canceled after Ukrainian nationalist and other right-wing elements brought pressure to bear. The Vancouver Recital Society and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra each determined that a Malofeev concert would be "inappropriate," in effect holding the pianist responsible for the crimes committed by the political leadership in Russia.

At Kleinhans Music Hall, Malofeev performed Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major with the Buffalo Philharmonic, conducted by JoAnn Falletta, the orchestra's music director, to general acclaim. One review on Bachtrack commented in part, "Virtuosity returned in spades in a final movement that Prokofiev famously described as an 'argument' between soloist and orchestra. Malofeev made it an über-exciting journey just this side of breathless."

The *Buffalo News* expressed quasi-disapproval of the orchestra's decision to hold the concert in a March 4 article: "As concert halls and art galleries across the world cancel events with Russian artists as part of a pro-Ukrainian cultural boycott, the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra took a different tack on Friday, welcoming Russian pianist Alexander Malofeev for a show of largely Russian music."

"The move puzzled at least some Western New Yorkers," wrote the *News*, "who called it inappropriate to promote Russian culture even as the country attacks Kiev and Kharkiv."

In a statement to the newspaper, BPO spokesman Patrick O'Herron noted that the orchestra recognized "the gravity of the conflict in Ukraine." He went on, "One of the reasons we are going forward with this weekend's concerts is to show our support of all who are suffering, as we believe in the healing power of music in the most troubling times." Malofeev, he added, was "not responsible for the war."

In an email to the *News*, Brendan Whistler, the son of Harold and Sandra Whistler, the sponsors of the Buffalo performances, called Malofeev "a wonderful, brilliant young man." Whistler added, "My personal opinion is that we should be thinking of the Ukrainian people at this time, not prosecuting or trying to 'cancel' 20-year-old Russian kids who have no voice in this terrible situation."

In a video presentation prior to the concerts, conductor Falletta encouraged listeners to attend the March 4 and 5 performances. "Have you ever wondered," she asked, "what it would be like to be at the first concert of someone who became an enormous superstar?" After referring to debut performances by Yo Yo Ma, Van Cliburn and others, Falletta continued, "These are star-filled nights, and we have that coming up. ... In Buffalo, [Malofeev] is making his North American debut with orchestra. I'm sure he will never forget it, I will never forget it, and you will never forget it. This young man is truly extraordinary, one of the greatest talents that we have ever seen."

Following the performances, Falletta commented on Facebook, "In addition to his splendid performance, Alexander spent part of his weekend coaching and having a fun visit with young Buffalo pianists."

Falletta also shared a review by Steven Kruger writing for *New York Arts*, which has not yet appeared on their website. After noting that the Buffalo Philharmonic had performed the Ukrainian national anthem, Kruger observed that this was "an appropriate gesture, given that

the program's 20-year-old debut pianist, Alexander Malofeev, is Russian and under threat of cancellation everywhere, and through no fault of his own had just lost a recital in Vancouver. Fortunately his performance before this unfamiliar Buffalo audience was to be a triumph of virtuosity, energy, and even angry solidarity."

Kruger commented that Malofeev was "impassive in appearance (he does not smile), has the even walk and aloof demeanor of a runway model and the slow bow of a diplomat from another time. But the moment he is at the piano, all hell breaks loose. Malofeev has an effortless technique and a right hand which seems to have an aggressive life of its own, as he hovers over it with his left cueing it like a conductor."

JoAnn Falletta is a multiple Grammy Award-winning conductor who studied with Leonard Bernstein among other leading conductors. In addition to her work at the Buffalo Philharmonic, Falletta is the Connie and Marc Jacobson Music Director Laureate of the Virginia Symphony, Principal Guest Conductor of the Brevard Music Center in North Carolina and Artistic Adviser to the Hawaii Symphony. She was recently named one of the "Fifty Great Conductors," past and present, by *Gramophone* magazine. Upon her appointment as Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic, Falletta became the first woman to lead a major American ensemble.

Her North American guest conducting appearances have included the orchestras of Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Detroit, Dallas, Houston, St. Louis, Toronto, Montreal, Seattle, San Diego, New Jersey and the National Symphony Orchestra. International appearances include those with the London Symphony, Liverpool, and Manchester-BBC Philharmonics, RTE Concert Orchestra (Dublin), Scottish BBC Orchestra, Czech and Rotterdam Philharmonics, Orchestra National de Lyon, Mannheim Orchestra, Real Orquesta Sinfonica de Sevilla and the Lisbon Metropolitan Orchestra.



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