

CSO performs gripping concert of Prokofiev

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"Alexander Nevsky" is famed as one of the great Soviet-era films with a soundtrack by Sergei Prokofiev.

The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra's performance on Thursday night of Prokofiev's cantata arranged from the film score will be remembered as one of the most gripping of the season.

Joining the orchestra, the May Festival Chorus and a sensational mezzo-soprano, Sasha Cooke, vividly brought the epic to life.

And on the podium, Israeli-born guest conductor Pinchas Steinberg made both an auspicious debut and a homecoming. The 65-year-old maestro, who studied violin with legends Josef Gingold and Jascha Heifetz, was principal second violin of the Cincinnati Symphony in 1968.

The evening opened the second week of the orchestra's "Russian Festival," and included a rare performance of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 1, "Winter Daydreams."

Alexander Nevsky was a 13th-century Russian prince who fought Swedes, Teutonic Knights and Lithuanians for the fatherland. Sergei Eisenstein's 1938 film about the Russian hero includes among its scenes the epic "Battle on the Ice."

Among Steinberg's conducting posts, he has been permanent guest conductor of the Vienna State Opera, chief conductor of Vienna's Radio Symphony Orchestra and musical director of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande in Geneva. He is a busy opera conductor, which may partly explain his success in bringing drama and atmosphere to this music.

The gloomy mood of Russia under Mongolian rule came through in the orchestra's chilly opening notes. The May Festival Chorus, prepared by Robert Porco, performed the Russian text confidently. The men were expressive storytellers as they sang with melancholy about slaughtering Swedes, and, joined by the women, fervently called Russian citizens to fight for the homeland. The singers shouted in the heat of battle against trumpet fanfares, and the great Russian victory chorus that concluded the work was something to behold.

Cooke, in her Cincinnati Symphony debut, projected a richly hued, arresting voice in the tragic lament, "Field of the Dead." She communicated the heartbreaking text with simplicity yet with a deep sense of sorrow.

The orchestra played with virtuosity, and Steinberg brought vivid detail to the score - electrifying the brass, or lavishing attention on the strings. The climactic "Battle on the Ice" as riveting as the battle was depicted with shivering strings, the unusual timbres of saxophone and tuba and shouting choristers. Its slow-motion conclusion, with slithering strings, was a terrific depiction of the invaders sinking through the ice.

Steinberg opened the program with Symphony No. 1 in G Minor, written by a 26-year-old Tchaikovsky. The work looks back to Mendelssohn as well as ahead to Tchaikovsky's more familiar symphonies and ballets that came later.

Leading without a score, the conductor propelled tempos well, and beautifully evoked the bleak winter landscape of movements entitled "Daydreams of a Winter Journey" and "Land of Desolation, Land of Mists." Steinberg strove for a light, transparent sound in this early work, which is nevertheless rich in Russian spirit. It was a canvas of subtle expression, and he allowed orchestral soloists to soar. Principal oboist Dwight Parry played his solo with nuance and haunting beauty.