

Fischer creates enthralling show

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UTAH SYMPHONY, PIANIST LOUIS LORTIE AND CONDUCTOR THIERRY FISCHER, Abravanel Hall, Friday, additional performance Jan. 31, 801-355-2787

It's been over a year since Swiss conductor Thierry Fischer made his Utah Symphony debut — and in that time his refined musicality and expressive conducting have been sorely missed.

Fortunately, he's back in Salt Lake City this weekend leading the symphony in a wide-ranging program of music by Franz Schubert, Felix Mendelssohn and Igor Stravinsky.

Fischer made a huge impact the last time he was here — and that was repeated Friday night. One of the most dynamic and expressive conductors to have appeared here in a long time, Fischer's musicality is a welcome addition this season.

The concert opened with a gorgeously crafted reading of Schubert's Symphony No. 8 ("Unfinished"). Marked by long fluid lines, this was a wonderfully defined and eloquent performance, with the orchestra playing seamlessly. Fischer showed a fine sense for details, paying careful attention to matters of nuances in dynamics, tempos and expression. He also skillfully captured the moodiness of the work, from the drama of the dark and somber opening movement to the second movement's lightness and lyrical grace.

Fischer coaxed richly textured reading from the orchestra, whose playing was well-articulated, cleanly defined and wonderfully executed.

The soloist this weekend is Louis Lortie, making a return visit after a lengthy absence from Abravanel Hall.

Lortie gave a wonderfully crafted performance of Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No. 1 in G minor, op. 25, that captured the storminess of the first movement, the dreaminess of the second and the playfulness of the third.

The Canadian pianist, who makes his home in Berlin, is an amazing musician who possesses remarkable technique. And the soloist certainly needs fine technical acumen to get himself through this work. A demanding piece in terms of its virtuosic writing, Lortie made short work of this and made it look easy in the bargain. And playing on a Fazioli, Lortie easily brought a crispness to his playing that this music demands.

And this was a collaboration made in heaven. Lortie and Fischer approached the work from the same aspect — bringing a classical veneer to music that is fundamentally romantic.

The slow movement in particular was beautifully played. Lortie brought out the chamber music quality of the Andante effortlessly, fashioning his playing with a seamlessness that captured the intimacy and otherworldliness of this music wonderfully.

The concert closed with the 1947 revision of Stravinsky's ballet "Petrouchka."

This richly colorful score, which Stravinsky's reworking doesn't alter, is vibrant, forceful and dynamic, and Fischer captured the brilliance of the music with his insightful and penetrating reading. He brought out the orchestral colors and let the orchestra bask in the radiance of the music.

Right from the opening outburst, one knew that this was going to be a special performance, and when it ended some 40 minutes later, one wasn't disappointed. It was one of the most enthralling performances heard in Abravanel Hall in quite some time — in fact, since Fischer conducted the Utah Symphony in Hector Berlioz's "Symphonie fantastique" last season.

And the musicians played luminously. It's a challenging score with many solo passages, and the players didn't disappoint either. They played with a conviction and a passion that mirrored Fischer's.

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