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Concert review: SPCO rebuilds with Campogrande in the spotlight

Ladies and gentlemen, the replacements are in the house. That is, the replacements for the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra musicians who took early retirement as part of last year's contract settlement.

Granted, not all of the empty positions have been filled -- and the seven new musicians technically are temporary -- but consider this season something like a lease with an option to buy if the chemistry clicks.

And there was solid evidence at Saturday night's season-opening concert that the rebuilding of the orchestra could go smoothly. Performing before an enthusiastic, near-capacity crowd at the Ordway, the ensemble had some marvelous moments in the Beethoven symphonies that were bookends for the program -- the Eighth and Seventh.

But the strongest impression came from the program's newest work, an intriguing jazz-flavored, pseudo-piano concerto by Italian composer Nicola Campogrande.

Two more Italians spearheaded its world premiere: conductor Roberto Abbado (entering his final season as an SPCO artistic partner) and pianist Emanuele Arciuli. The latter clearly had a special kinship with the composer's style, for he took what could have been an agitated, overly busy opening movement and made it a cohesive blend of bustle and calming pastoral.

And that's appropriate, for the work is called "Urban Gardens" and is intended to summon the spirit of rooftop oases and verdant courtyards. It sounded something like a modernist homage to George Gershwin with its bluesy, slow movement and evocation of urban landscapes.

Arciuli handled its ample demands impeccably, whether scurrying about the keyboard hyperactively or laying florid lines atop the orchestra in a style reminiscent of Oscar Peterson's orchestral excursions.

Actually, the Campogrande piece had an advantage over the Beethoven symphonies, in that habit and muscle memory never came into play for the three-dozen or so musicians on stage performing together for the first time.

Alas, in the Beethoven symphonies (especially the Seventh), Abbado had some very specific ideas about emphasizing oft-hidden phrases and changing up the tempos, something that sometimes led to things getting a touch off kilter.

However, I'm betting that this ensemble will grow tighter by the week, just as each of the Beethoven symphonies grew more precise and spirited by the movement Saturday night. Yes, there were still plenty of freelancers on stage who won't be around every week, but the new players will join the SPCO veterans to form a majority of the ensemble for most of this season. And that bodes well for shaping a consistent sound.

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Who: The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra with conductor Roberto Abbado and pianist Emanuele Arciuli

What: Works by Beethoven and Nicola Campogrande

When: 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Ted Mann Concert Hall, 2128 Fourth St. S., Minneapolis

Tickets: \$42-\$5, available at 651-291-1144 or thespc.org

Capsule: The rebuilding of the SPCO takes a big step forward.