

Ralph's revenge

Ralph Votapek makes history with all-Gershwin extravaganza

By LAWRENCE COSENTINO

Steeley, stylish piano man Ralph Votapek couldn't have much left to prove. His career began with a shocking win over his Soviet rivals in the first Van Cliburn competition

Votapek Plays

Gershwin

Lansing Symphony Orchestra

With Ralph Votapek, piano

8 p.m., Friday, Sept. 18

Tickets start at \$20

Warrior Center

750 E. Shaw Lane, East Lansing

(517) 487-5001,

lansingsymphony.org

George Gershwin all night, from the National Anthem to the bottom of the Second Rhapsody.

To find out what makes Votapek arpeggiate, you have to put him on the psychiatrist's couch. It turns out his high school music teacher wouldn't let him play Gershwin.

"She thought Gershwin's music was cheap," he said.

Votapek comes from Milwaukee, Libera's home town. Votapek's teachers feared a repeat.

"Libera's teacher was disappointed he turned out the way he did," Votapek said. "So Gershwin was forbidden fruit to me."

Friday night is Votapek's revenge: wall

to wall Gershwin. For the first time in his career, Votapek will play four Gershwin pieces on the same night.

He'll start in with the composer's snappy variations on "I Got Rhythm," stride through the Concerto in F and the seldom performed Second Rhapsody and finish big with the famous "Rhapsody in Blue."

"I suppose it's a gimmick — and I have to confess it was my idea — but I really didn't think Timothy Muffitt would take it," Votapek said.

Muffitt, music director and conductor of the symphony, said the idea was a "stroke of genius."

"It has all the perfect qualities for a concert here in Lansing," Muffitt said. "Ralph is one of our hometown heroes. It's all-American. It has pieces that are highly recognizable and pieces that are seldom heard. It's a no-brainer."

Friday will be the first time Muffitt has ever performed with a single soloist all night. Visiting soloists usually join the orchestra for just one or two pieces.

"He's going to be very busy that evening," Muffitt said.

The maestro isn't worried about Gershwin-fatigue setting in.

"Fortunately, Gershwin is fabulous," Muffitt said.

Votapek, who never indulges in anything close to hype, was more laconic.

"If you like Gershwin, you'll be fine. If you don't, don't come," he said.

Stamina-wise, Votapek said, the whole night is about the same as playing one concerto by Brahms or Rachmaninoff. The orchestra carries a lot of the load, especially in the serious Second Rhapsody.

"I don't think this is a difficult concert,"



Photo by Sergei Karklo

Ralph Votapek takes on an ambitious all-Gershwin program Friday with the Lansing Symphony Orchestra.

Votapek shrugged. "When you're playing a recital, you're playing non-stop, 80 or 90 minutes. Here, I sit out and listen one fourth of the time." Votapek played the night's most famous

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work, "Rhapsody in Blue," for the first time with no less a conductor than Paul Whiteman. Whiteman conducted the premiere of the work in 1924 — with George Gershwin himself on piano.

When Votapek came to Northwestern University in 1956, he entered a competition to play with the Milwaukee Pops Orchestra. Votapek won, and playing "Rhapsody in Blue" two nights with the Pops and Whiteman was the prize. He learned the music in six weeks, aided by his familiarity with the piece. He'd worn out an old Oscar Levant recording of the work as a youngster.

"(Whiteman) was very nice to me," Votapek recalled of the conductor, who was often referred to in the media as the "King of jazz."

"It wasn't really jazz, but a lot of people thought of him as that," Votapek said. "Rhapsody in Blue" was sort of his signature piece. I remember him conducting me through some of the cadenzas, and I was happy to oblige."

Since then, Votapek figures he's played the Rhapsody 70 or 80 times.

"I've done it with Chicago, with Philadelphia, and I've done it with some orchestras that maybe shouldn't be playing it," Votapek said. "Then it's not so pleas-

ant. The main theme is grandiose and always exciting to play, but you have to have a good orchestra. Lansing can certainly handle it."

Votapek hasn't played the Second Rhapsody, perhaps the most substantial work of the night, since the late 1970s. Arthur Fiedler, then maestro of the Boston Pops, asked him to do a recording.

"It's especially exciting to hear the Second Rhapsody," Muffitt said. "It's a major utterance of Gershwin's that very few of us really know."

"It shows a greater sophistication," Votapek added. "The orchestra has a lot to say in it. It has a march, and a tango, and some Cuban-sounding music. It has 42 tempo changes in 15 minutes — it's all over the place."

Votapek officially retired from his post as piano professor at MSU 11 years ago, when he was 65. But it doesn't look like much of a retirement.

In the coming year, he's doing recitals in Minnesota, Florida and Michigan and several campus concerts with College of Music colleagues Guy Yehuda, Richard Sherman and I-Fu Wang. His 25th Latin American tour is coming up early next year. A new CD of music by Ravel, Schumann and Bartok, recorded on a tour of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, is due later this month.

"It's kind of amazing that it's still going," he admitted, modestly substituting "it" for "I."