



OCTOBER 1, 2008

CSO celebrates with a glorious opener

Season's Greeting

BY Lindsay Koob

Mayor Joe Riley, flanked by an honor guard of former CSO board presidents, was on hand to proclaim a special David Stahl Week. Jack Ellenberg, of the S.C. Department of Commerce, appeared later in the evening to present Stahl with the Palmetto Ambassador Award.

It was touching, but the music remained the evening's best part, reminding us that great art is really what the fuss was all about.

Stahl's choice of fare was itself a tribute to how far Charleston audiences have come in trusting his musical judgment. The packed house responded happily to a work most of us had never heard before: Sergei Prokofiev's stirring cantata, *Alexander Nevsky*.

The music was drawn from his score to director Sergei Eisenstein's Stalin-era movie. It tells the epic tale of the hero's legendary 13th-century defeat of invading armies — one of them in a great battle on a frozen Russian lake.

Prokofiev took us everywhere Russian (and film) music should. The grim and foreboding introductory passage (nobody does gloom and doom like the Russians) led into a reverent choral song about the hero. Fevered intensity returned to depict the threat of advancing Teutonic knights and call the people to rise in defense of the motherland.

Then we got the harrowing "Battle on the Ice" movement — its frantic, pile-driving pace reflecting the rising frenzy of combat. The following "Field of the Dead" treated us to the rich and supremely expressive mezzo voice of guest soloist Gigi Mitchell-Velasco. She sang sorrowfully of a young woman's search for her fallen suitors after the battle.

But the piece ended on a note of celebration, as the conquering hero enters the liberated city of Pskov.

Stahl, his players, and Robert Taylor's accomplished 150-voice chorus (the CSO Chorus plus the College of Charleston's Concert Choir) simply knocked this one out of the ball park — with gutsy, exciting music-making and some really heavy decibels. The CSO's brasses were particularly thrilling.

Dispensing with the usual intermission, Stahl and company then plunged headlong into one of the best-known festival pieces: Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* — written to celebrate the battle that thwarted Napoleon's ill-fated invasion of Russia.

But, as if a small army of percussionists and pre-recorded cannon-blasts weren't enough, the mighty chorus joined the fray, singing the piece's pair of classic Russian hymns in a version that you almost never get to hear in concert.

Egad, it was noisy, but glorious, as the crowd's noisy standing O proved.

What a way to raise the curtain on a special new season!