Music Review: Unknown Romantic gems prove potent

By Jim Lowe
Staff Writer

Pianist Paul Orgel, one of Vermont’s finest, introduced three Romantic gems Sunday at Burlington’s University of Vermont Recital Hall that you likely never heard before — but should wish you had.

The three composers are all moderately well known — the French Ernest Chausson (1855-1899), the Czech Josef Suk (1874-1935) and the German Max Reger (1873-1916) — and have all written at least one work that is in the standard repertoire. None of Sunday’s three works is among those, but, if Orgel’s performance is any indication, they should be.

Still, Orgel’s encore illustrated why these composers remain second tier.

The most emotionally rewarding work was Suk’s 1907 “O Matince (About Mother),” Opus 28. Reminiscent of Dvorak, the composer’s father-in-law, the work tells Suk’s son about his mother, who died too young for him to have known her.

“When mother was a little girl” was lyrical and playful; “Once, in springtime,” programmatic and optimistic; “How she sang at night to her sick child,” full of tender sadness, with an underlying heart pounding; “Mother’s heart,” dark but grand; and the final “Remembering” proved tender and rhapsodic. It was a Bohemian tale from the heart.

Orgel, a UVM music faculty member, delivered Suk’s emotional tribute with depth and beauty. The veteran concert pianist has a substantial technique that never drew attention to itself, despite the virtuosic demands of the program. Instead, there was not only a deeply satisfying evenness in his playing but a broad palette of colors that successfully told the composers’ stories — and clearly, despite their dense scores.

Chausson, best known for his “Poeme” for violin and orchestra, writes in a rich, often thick style that brings to mind contemporaries Fauré, but without the lightness, and Franck, without the darkness. His 1896 “Quelques danses (Some Dances),” Opus 26, employed a broad spectrum of colors and emotions ranging from tender to rhapsodic to the outright virtuosity of the final “Forlane” — which Orgel delivered with flair.
Reger’s 1910-11 “Aus meinem Tagebuch (From My Diary),” Opus 82, Vol. 3, like most of the composer’s music, is reminiscent of late Brahms, yet without the brilliance. Still, the work’s harmonic richness — sometimes relating more to Wagner — and personal nature made it, in Orgel’s capable hands, deeply satisfying.

Finally, it was Orgel’s encore that put these players in their place. Chopin’s Nocturne in A-flat Major, Opus 32, No. 2, delivered with sensitivity and grandeur, used a fraction of the notes to deliver a deeper and more powerful message than any of the other works on the program.

Still, Orgel’s recital Sunday was a rich and deeply rewarding experience.

PIANIST PAUL ORGEL

Pianist Paul Orgel will perform a solo recital at 7:30 p.m. Friday, April 4, at Saint Michael’s College’s McCarthy Arts Center in Colchester, featuring works of Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Verdi-Liszt and Chopin. Admission is free; for information, go online to www.paulorgel.com.