Pianos lift symphony

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This week’s Houston Symphony concert had its good and bad moments, but the good more than compensated for the bad.

A well-played, lyrical reading of Verdi’s overture to La Forza del Destino began the concert, followed by Respighi’s third suite of Ancient Airs and Dances. The work consists of a string orchestra transcription of three 16th and 17th century lute compositions.

Admittedly, the symphony’s string section is no Philadelphia string section. This was evident in the first two movements where the playing was delicate, but lacking in depth. But in the third movement, the Passacaglia, the orchestra seemed to find new strength and the result was grand as the sections passed the themes from one to another.

The evening’s highlight came next as duo pianists Gorini-Lorenzi, three percussionists, and conductor Barbarolli performed Bartok’s Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion. The rhythmic and technical difficulties of this seldom heard piece are nearly insurmountable, but the soloists produced a really first-rate performance. The last movement was the best and the effect was spellbinding.

Mendelssohn’s “Italian” Symphony followed the intermission. The reading was only pretty good. The first movement was somewhat slow, thereby draining some of the spirit. The second was too deliberate and the third movement was kind of gooey. But here again the last movement seemed to fall into place and the playing was most spirited.

The program closed with Tchaikovsky’s fantasy Francesca da Rimini. The less said about this the better. I still have a headache from the tympani-bass drum-gong blasts at the end of the piece.