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Music Review: Wheeling Symphony excels in concert

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The snow, evidently more harrowing in West Virginia, almost delayed the long overdue return of the Wheeling Symphony at Carnegie Hall in Oakland on Sunday.

But with the excitement over conductor Andre Raphael Smith, now in the fourth year of his tenure, the services of Olympian violinist Kyoko Takezawa and a spirited and well-rehearsed ensemble, the orchestra wisely went on to play for a sparse yet enthusiastic audience.

Smith brought a smart and savvy program to Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra turf, featuring "Iscariot" by Christopher Rouse, the PSO's composer of the year during the 2004 season when the piece was last heard, and a pair of Beethoven works, the rarely heard Fourth Symphony and the more familiar Violin Concerto (albeit with a soloist who is not familiar to audiences here).

The concert opened with "Iscariot," named, though not literally, for Judas Iscariot. Being a neo-Romanticist, Rouse concentrated on a strong emotional effect through the use of thick chords.

Immediately Smith showed himself to be an intelligent and disciplined conductor, given to a precise beat and cues. If there was any problem, the orchestra's wind and percussion section took nearly half of the concert to adjust to the hall, something which manifested itself in inconsistent and ragged entrances.

The ensemble gained confidence during the Beethoven symphony, which Smith expertly conducted from memory, ending the third movement with a musical exclamation point and whipping through a rapid-fire finale. It suitably showed why this group is dominant among the region's second tier of orchestras.

By the time Takezawa opened with the concert's signature octaves, the Wheeling had settled into a first-rate and respectful accompaniment. Not that they needed the pianissimos. Takezawa's athletic interpretation, often a sweeping force of nature, was powerful enough to fill the largest of concert halls.

Where other violinists emerge from the orchestra on certain passages, every note here was crystal-clear, indeed almost too robust for the Carnegie at times. But with the ease of her virtuosity -- the cadenzas frequently took off like rockets -- Takezawa provided an explosive finish.