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February 13 – Concert at Salle Playel



Here is the empty stage as we arrived. Our seats are in seats to the right of the picture, not exactly box seats but essentially like them. The concert hall is owned by the state and has been recently renovated. It is on rue du faubourg Saint- Honoré. When we got off the Metro we decided to follow a couple who looked to us like people going to a concert hall. Sure enough, our instincts were right. It was 2 blocks from the Terme metro station.

It turned out to be a full house. Even the seats behind the stage were full.

It was a full symphony orchestra, the Symphony de Toulouse, acity of half a million people in the south of France.



We went to this concert because it featured Rachmaninoff's "Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini." We tend to avoid music of the romantic period but this piece has a special place in my heart and in my life. I heard it in a movie called *The Story of Three Loves* with James Mason as a leading man. The movie made a deep impression on me. It was made in 1953, which means I was 11 years old. I remember which movie house we went to and I remember the love story in which the music was played. I was swept away by the music and the love story of a ballerina who danced to the music. What dancing!

It is a tragic story. The ballerina has a heart condition and shouldn't be dancing, but she must dance to live! She does dance and finally crumples and dies in the middle of a fast part. I cried my eyes out, practically floating out the door on my tears. I stayed through the film credits to learn the name of the music and then looked for it. Eventually, I got an LP recording of it and wore it out I played it so much.

So when I saw it on the play list I asked Ernie to get us tickets to hear it. We had no idea about the orchestra but showed up, dressed as well as we could and enjoyed the beautiful concert hall.



The first piece was by Shostakovich and the second piece was the Rhapsody. The pianist was Denis Matsuev, a winner of the Tchaikovsky Competition. What a fine musician. And he was almost a caricature of the Russian pianist. He was broad and had a full head of curly hair that shook when he moved around. His body was very expressive and at times he hit the piano so hard with both hands that his body jumped and his hair shook. It was just great!

The delicacy that he used for a few places in the music where a line ends in one sweet note, the fullness of the sound from the piano and the beautiful runs. I don't know who played the recording I had as a girl but it was nothing like this. The orchestra was great. What a rich wonderful experience. It was thrilling.

The audience went wild at the end of the piece, yelling bravo, bravo. I expected them to jump up but they didn't. They just kept clapping and clapping. After three curtain calls and the uproar didn't diminish he sat down and played an encore. Then they yelled and clapped for more. We got another encore and then a third. I was with them. He was incredible.

Then came the intermission.

The second part of the concert was equally amazing. The final piece was Danse Symphoniques by Rachmaninoff. It is a series of dances with very different rhythms and featuring different parts of the orchestra. There was a mazurka, a waltz, a minuet, and other dances.

The music was a little schmaltzy but the orchestra was superb! The music allowed the various parts of the orchestra to shine. The first one started with the oboe and followed by clarinets and bassoons. There was a huge percussion section with a bass drum, a gong, the usual tympani but with three drums, a glockenspiel, snare drum, symbols, a triangle, other hanging bells, various rattles and rasps and a tamborine.

I don't remember when I last watched a full symphony orchestra with over 100 musicians. There were 30 violins, 10 cellos, 12 violas, 4 French horns, 3 oboes, 2 bassoons and a contra bassoon two trumpets, two trombones and on and on. They were all exquisite musicians.

When I lived in LA in the 70's the LA Symphony got a new conductor, Maria Carlo Guilini, who whipped the symphony into shape. He was an international star conductor. I remember reading a review of a concert they played a year later. The reviewer said, Guilini made the violins "shimmer." Since then when I listen to an orchestra I listen for "shimmering" violins. Until tonight I had never heard that. But in the Rhapsody and in the Danses the violins shimmered over and over again. What a treat!

At the end the crowd went wild! They clapped for 5 minutes. They roared in approval as the conductor instructed the woodwinds to stand up, and then the French horns, then the trumpets, then the percussion. The conductor agreed to an encore, a sweet piece. Followed by more clapping so he played the Cossack dance from the Nutcracker which is a lively piece that uses the entire orchestra. Again the crowd went wild and they played a third encore, Bizet's Toreador. They dashed it off as if it were nothing. I began to think, let them go home. The musicians have worked very hard tonight. But they also seemed to be enjoying the audience's response.

We were amazed that we had come to such a great concert. We came there because of a childhood memory but witnessed a grand performance. We had never heard of the Orchestra de Toulouse.