


Eastern Connecticut Symphony Orchestra kicks off its 2018-19 season

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By **Lee Howard** (/apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=l.howard) Day staff writer

✉ l.howard@theday.com (mailto:l.howard@theday.com)  [KingstonLeeHow](https://www.twitter.com/KingstonLeeHow)
(<http://www.twitter.com/KingstonLeeHow>)

New London – The Eastern Connecticut Symphony Orchestra began its 2018-19 season Saturday at the Garde Arts Center with trapeze-like performances of four distinctive pieces, including three rhapsodies, all of which called for intricate coordination among all four sections of the ensemble.

“It was terrifying,” one member of the orchestra could be heard saying after the performance, which was attended by about 900 people and that began at the new ECSO start time of 7:30, a half hour earlier than concerts of the past.

There were a few wobbles at the beginning as players worked out opening-night jitters, but the overall effect was masterful, as music director and conductor Toshiyuki Shimada drew out all the tempo changes and dynamic variances to enhance the drama.

The highlight of the evening had to be Sergei Rachmaninoff’s “Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini,” Op. 43, featuring the smoking hot playing of pianist Svetlana Smolina, who came out on stage in a glittering red strapless gown so beguiling that the audience chuckled when she had to adjust her dress to be comfortable enough to sit in front of the keys.

Never letting her concentration waver, Smolina proceeded to pounce on each note with either great ferocity or eager tenderness, majestically alternating between a clump of chords and a cascade of shimmering harplike high notes.

This rhapsody is a real showpiece, with one of the most romantic melodies of all time, and the execution of the work was exquisite, Shimada wringing every last sentiment out the string section while Smolina alternately marched and gamboled up and down the keys right up until the humorous and unexpected ending.

The audience gave Smolina and the orchestra one of the most extended standing ovations ever during an ECSO concert.

The Rachmaninoff piece had been preceded by George Enescu’s “Romanian Rhapsody,” Opus 11, No. 1, a lively and colorful piece that proved very enjoyable, with its danceable Romanian folk melodies influenced by gypsy music, not to mention its frenetic pace. The orchestration included a piccolo solo that burst forth like a teapot whistle and had several members of the audience holding their ears, and later the circus-like tempo full of trumpet wails, cymbal crashes and kettle drum rolls kept the audience fully engaged, except for a brief interlude in the balcony when the ECSO youth orchestra and string ensemble were allowed to filter into the back of the Garde during the performance.

(It should be noted that the young people were a great addition to the orchestra as it played the national anthem to start the season, and it was wonderful to see them in the audience as well, but perhaps the ECSO should have allowed more time for them to get from the stage to their seats.)

Two other pieces on the night, Maurice Ravel's "Rapsodie espagnole" and Christopher Rouse's "Rapture," were equally engaging.

"Rapture," one of the few ECSO performances featuring a living composer, is a real find, starting out as a tone poem solidified by the ostinato line of the double basses and featuring bird-like melodies in the flute section as well as the interesting juxtaposition of the bassoon and violin.

As the tempo gradually increases throughout the piece, the brass and percussion sections become more prominent, with the unusual scoring calling for a bass drum, triangle, tam-tam, chimes and glockenspiel. The unusual combinations in the percussion section combined with the gradually increasing tempo required a circus-like performance by Shimada, who brilliantly cued players and held the sections together as the piece came to its thrilling and beautiful ending.

Ravel's masterpiece, a big and brooding homage to the composer's Basque heritage, needed no introduction to the ECSO crowd, and as with other works on the night Shimada did not offer one, an unusual departure for the maestro. Instead, he let his players do the talking, spinning out a dramatic interpretation of the Spanish melodies, full of fire and rhythmic perfection featuring castanets and the tambourine. The final festival movement brimmed with lively playing, particularly in the woodwinds, bringing the evening to an exciting and upbeat conclusion.