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By Michael Anthony / Staff Writer

REVIEW OF "RAGTIME POPS" CONCERT WITH BUTCH THOMPSON AND THE MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

Butch Thompson deftly plays to ragtime's diversity

By now it's hardly news; the ragtime revival of early 1970s brought us one of America's most original, most precious contributions to music.

But the revival was more than a fad. Ragtime stayed with us, and now we can hear it in a concert hall, courtesy of gifted musicians like Butch Thompson, in all its delicacy and verve.

Thompson, a native of Marine on St. Croix who now lives in St. Paul, can most often be found these days playing ragtime and early jazz piano at European jazz festivals, or, as was the case last fall, in Egypt, where he did a residency at the American University in Cairo.

Happily, the Minnesota Orchestra managed to engage him for three concerts this weekend in a program conducted by Mark Russell Smith that deftly aligned the ragtime of Scott Joplin with later creations by James P. Johnson, Eubie Blake, Jelly Roll Morton and Fats Waller.

The overall impression left by Thompson and his colleagues after Friday night's concert at Orchestra Hall concerned the amazing diversity of ragtime music. If ragtime is a language, it's a language with many dialects.

Even the opening set – five Joplin rags arranged by Gordon Wright for piano and orchestra – was a coat of many colors, from the bracing "Cleopha March" to the precision syncopation of the famous "Maple Leaf Rag."

Between these was one of Joplin's loveliest creations, "Solace," subtitled "A Mexican Serenade," and Thompson is just about the only one who plays it right, each time taking a slight pause before the entrance of the main theme. Eubie Blake's "Charleston Rag" is a puzzler. Blake claimed he wrote it in 1899, the same year the "Maple Leaf Rag" was published, and yet it sounds closer to Johnson's more aggressive stride style of the late 1920s.

Then there's Morton's knuckle-busting "A Perfect Rag," which falls somewhere between Joplin and Blake. Thompson conveyed its aggressive rhythms without ever pounding.

The centerpiece was Johnson's "Yamekraw Overture" – a piano rhapsody, as Johnson called it – an ambitious piece that was premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1928.

The music owes something to Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," but it has its own character. It's certainly closer to authentic ragtime than Gershwin's "Rhapsody," but its form is overly episodic, or at least sounds that way on first hearing. It made one want to hear more of Johnson's concert music, much of which is lost or long out of print.

A rarity in the second half was Waller's tender and lush "Chelsea." For a couple of numbers Thompson showed his considerable skill as a clarinetist. As a finale, he played Waller's "Honeysuckle Rose," with apt support on drums by Elliot Fine and on vibes by Marvin Dahlgren.

Visit Butch's website for more information, including audio clips from live performances: www.butchthompson.com