

Symphonia makes fine showing at Eissey with Platt, Schubert

Written by Greg Stepanich on 20 January 2014.

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It was a pleasure to see Alexander Platt back at the helm of The Symphonia Boca Raton last week, and to see the orchestra trying out a new venue at the Eissey Campus Theatre in Palm Beach Gardens.

But seeing the conductor who led the band for three of its nine seasons would not have been as pleasurable had the music not been as good as it was, in particular in his choice of a too-rarely heard Schubert symphony (No. 6 in C, D. 589).

The group's first-ever appearance at the Eissey on Jan. 13 came only five days after the Fort Pierce-based Atlantic Classical Orchestra made its inaugural foray into Palm Beach County, a sure sign that arts organizers in the area are looking to the growing audiences in the northeastern part of the county for future support.

The Symphonia drew a decent house to its first Palm Beach Gardens effort, and comments I heard from other members of the audience were positive, so the orchestra may have found a good second home (they return in April with former Seattle Symphony director Gerard Schwarz in an all-Mozart program).

Joining Platt and the orchestra for the concert was the American pianist William Wolfram, who in turn was joined by Symphonia trumpeter Jeffrey Kaye, the group's artistic director, for the Piano Concerto No. 1 (in C minor, Op. 35) of Shostakovich, a work for piano, trumpet and strings. This is a marvelous piece, impish and sparkling in its outer movements, and its popularity has grown steadily in the past couple decades, particularly with chamber orchestras.

Wolfram, a Naumburg and Kapell silver medalist, played the concerto with a nice light touch overall, letting it all out at the end for the frantic shimmy just before the closing bars, and adding some persuasive forcefulness to the various Shostakovich grotesqueries such as the big bass notes in the slow movement. Wolfram is a

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good, strong, clean player with a large, accurate technique; his approach is not remotely eccentric, but steady and reliable.

Kaye, one of the best-known of this area's trumpeters, had a few uncharacteristically messy passages here and there, but in general played with the commanding sound familiar to intermission stragglers at the group's Boca Raton venue, who are always summoned back to their seats by a Kaye fanfare. Platt led the proceedings with a versatile hand, choosing faster tempos that were brisk without being manic, and in the slow movement, focusing on gentleness and delicacy, evoking a wistful but not gloomy Shostakovich, a rising young composer with endless career possibilities who had not yet fallen afoul of Stalin.

The concert began with a witty, breezy reading of Rossini's overture to his comic one-act, *La Scala di Seta*. Some of the higher passages in the criminally difficult principal oboe part sounded effortful, but ensemble was generally quite good, with solid string and wind ensemble, and charming emphases on the repeated grace-note "winks" in the primary material.

The Rossini made an ideal partner for the Schubert symphony that closed the concert, and not just because they're in the same key. They share the same kind of genial spirit, though of course Schubert is aiming for different vistas. One of Platt's favorite things to do is give extensive remarks about the works on the program before conducting, and at the Eissey he offered valuable context and insight into the Schubert, especially in stressing its affiliation with rustic dance forms.

String intonation was a little off in the opening bars of the Schubert, but that cleared up quickly, and Platt returned his audience to a world of bubbly high spirits, making sure the first theme had a cheeky feel without slighting the Beethovenian muscle Schubert follows it with. The music had a fresh, confident sound and an infectious energy, and the orchestra clearly enjoyed playing what was probably, for most of the musicians, unfamiliar repertoire.

The Hadynesque second movement (*Andante*) also successfully explored the same kind of contrast: Leisurely, sweet and homey in the initial measures, then powerful and striking in the secondary material. Platt is able to make those differences plain, and show listeners how they grow organically out of the same compositional impulse.

In the third movement, which is deeply indebted to the Beethoven of the Seventh Symphony, Platt kept the tension high during the somewhat uninspired trio material, which helped the Symphonia keep the momentum going. In the finale, conductor and orchestra made much of the catchy opening tune, then the orchestra followed the subsequent martial outburst with excellent ensemble work as strings raced back and forth with busy scale patterns.

Each of the melodies in this abundantly tuneful finale got careful attention, so that they stood out (and pointed the way to future symphonic triumphs such as the Ninth). Platt also made sure to give each of the tune entrances a good buildup, which outlined Schubert's exceptional level of inspiration. Platt looked delighted to be conducting this wonderful music, and the musicians responded admirably well; this is music that needs a light but firm approach so that it can sing like it needs to and still surprise its auditors, and that's the kind of performance it received.

After the very fine Schubert, Platt led the Symphonia in an encore, the *Artist's Life* waltz (Op. 316) of Johann Strauss II. From the spirit of the dance to a literal dance was no great distance for the Symphonia or Platt (who cited this waltz as his favorite of the Strauss canon), and from the heavy second-beat authenticity of the underlying rhythm to the *gemütlichkeit* of the whistle-ready tunes, it was played like a real dance, not solely a symphonic exploration of three-quarter time.

The Symphonia Boca Raton's second concert, set for 3 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 9, at the Roberts Theater on the campus St. Andrew's School in western Boca, will be led by Grant Cooper, conductor of the West Virginia Symphony. Violinist Evgeny Kutik will be the guest soloist in the Concerto No. 22 (in A minor) of the Italian early Romantic master Giovanni Battista Viotti; the program also includes Ravel's Le Tombeau de Couperin and the Beethoven Fourth Symphony. Call 1-866-687-4201 or visit www.bocasymphonia.org for more information.

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