

Philadelphia visitors pay strong visit to Symphonia

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David Kim, concertmaster of the Philadelphia Orchestra, has made himself a regular visitor to South Florida over the past few years, and on Sunday afternoon with the Symphonia Boca Raton he was back in the spotlight again, where his combination of skill and easy audience rapport was bountifully on display.

Kim, who has led the Symphonia as guest conductor (and will do so again tonight at the Crest Theatre), was joined Sunday at the Roberts Theater at Boca's St. Andrew's School by Kensho Watanabe, the assistant conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, for a program of mostly familiar pieces from three different eras. Kim was the soloist in the E major Violin Concerto of J.S. Bach and the apparently deathless "Méditation" from Massenet's opera *Thaïs*; he also led the orchestra chamber-style for Tchaikovsky's *Souvenir de Florence*.

But Watanabe was the unknown quantity here, and he proved to be a director with good interpretive ideas and a genial podium style that was closer to coaching than beating time. The Third Symphony (in D, D. 200) of Franz Schubert, a precocious teenage work by the short-lived Austrian master, was the least well-known piece on the program, but its dimensions are well-suited for a chamber orchestra like this one.

Watanabe chose smart tempos for each movement that brought out the character of each of the movements, instead of obscuring them with a flashy idea like taking the finale at a breakneck pace. He indicated broad arcs of musical narrative with gestures rather than baton chops, which helped underline where the music was going and what to listen for.

Schubert may only have had a school orchestra to work with, but his writing gives no quarter, and is as difficult and muscular as anything in Haydn and most of early Beethoven. The Symphonia could have used another rehearsal session to get some of the kinks out, but overall it came off well, particularly in the very Haydnesque second movement, where conductor and orchestra were united in giving the music a full helping of *style galant*.

The first half of the concert opened with the Bach concerto, which Kim played with polish, technical assurance and elegance. Kim has a light, highly focused sound that got lost in the auditorium at some points; he's not a player who tries to overwhelm the listener with forceful fiddling. His gentle intensity served him well in the mournful second movement, which was chaste rather than operatic, and in the high-spirited finale, which came off with great charm. Watanabe and the Symphonia were fine collaborators.

The Massenet "Méditation" is a staple of the violin repertoire, even though as music it's deeply cheesy. And while it's hard to take seriously, it's also true that it's one of the better moments in all of *Thaïs*, which as a recent Florida Grand Opera production demonstrated, is saddled with a weak score whose contemporary neglect is not hard to understand despite its kinky, Netflix-ready story. And yet, this was a most effective reading of this short violin aria, undoubtedly because Kim, Watanabe and the orchestra simply gave it its late-Romantic due and let it speak for itself. The large audience at the Roberts Theater loved it, giving it the biggest acclaim of the afternoon.

Closing off the concert was the Tchaikovsky, played here in its string orchestra version rather than in its original string sextet garb. The Heroes Award for the day goes to the two lone violists who had to hold their own against an onslaught of violins, and did admirably well. Kim led the proceedings from a raised podium at the concertmaster's seat, and results were mixed. In leading Baroque music, as he's done before, it works better because there are few tempo changes.

Tchaikovsky, on the other hand, writes with a more elastic sense of tempo that he uses to expressive purpose. In the first movement of this lovely-but-windy piece, things tended to bog down after coming off a fast and furious entrance, which

left things muddy. Things were a bit better in the second movement, thanks to the continual pizzicato triplet vamp in the violins, and in the third movement, when Florence's Russian expat community makes its appearance in a folksong-style theme with a regular beat.

The tarantella finale was very effective, with plenty of group fireworks as the piece drove to its powerful conclusion. Still, this *Souvenir de Florence* would have hung together better, particularly in the first movement, with a conductor to keep things in order.

After a chat-free concert last month, The Symphonia, regrettably, returned to its gabbier ways Sunday with remarks from Kim, Watanabe and artistic director Jeffrey Kaye, some of which had to do with the NFL playoff game that afternoon between the Philadelphia Eagles and the Chicago Bears, with Kim saying he was trying to get through the music quickly to catch the kickoff. Amusing, and charming – unless, of course, like me you happen to be from Chicago.

David Kim and The Symphonia Boca Raton perform at 7:30 tonight at the Crest Theatre in Delray Beach. Kim will perform the Four Seasons concerti of Vivaldi as well as the Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 of Bach, in an informal setting in which audience members are encouraged to post to social media. Tickets are \$59; call 243-7922 or visit oldschoolsquare.org.