

Music Review: Princeton Symphony Orchestra Plays Mozart

By **Susan Van Dongen** - September 25, 2019

The Princeton Symphony Orchestra, opening its 2019-'20 season, presented an all-Mozart program last weekend, but it was also the late Edward T. Cone's day.

It was the annual Edward T. Cone concert, named in memory of the former Princeton University composer, pianist, author, and teacher.

In addition, conductor Rossen Milanov celebrated his 10th anniversary with the PSO by being named the Edward T. Cone Music Director of the PSO, recently endowed in perpetuity.

There was another Cone connection, too: the program featured Mozart's Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra in E-flat Major, a work that hadn't been performed by the orchestra for more than 20 years. The last time it was done the pianists were Cone and his student, Robert Taub.

This time the concerto was performed by the brilliant Naughton sisters, Christina and Michelle. Not only are they virtuosos, they are Princeton natives and twins.

The dual piano work was the main course, but we also enjoyed a wonderful appetizer when the overture to "The Marriage of Figaro" launched the concert.

This familiar melody — played by the PSO with *joie de vivre* — sparked instant joy. And the bustling strings and winds as well as changing melodic moods, brought to mind the havoc of a wedding day's preparations.

The buoyant mood on this last day of summer became even more so as the Naughton sisters took the stage.

The piano concerto began with an exuberant introduction, the melody cascading through the orchestra, from strings, to horns, to the bassoons and other winds, while the pianos waited in the wings. At last, the duo-soloists announced themselves with a trill and a flourish, and we were off on a musical adventure.

Mozart composed the work in 1779 as a showcase for himself and his sister, Maria Anna, and there is some sibling rivalry written into the piece, as the two solo parts are equally difficult and vital to the composition.

There is also a conversational quality to the work, and the Naughton sisters seemed to be trading lyrical phrases and quips, even finishing each other's sentences.

Throughout the concerto, new ideas and melodies simply poured out, then took on variations, then blended together and overlapped, then returned to their original form. The Naughton sisters, with musicianship that is both graceful and commanding, took on these challenges with seeming ease.

The PSO eased into the second movement, the andante, as subdued, sustained notes in the bassoons and horns provided grounding for the airy explorations on the keyboard.

I liked that the one sister had a more fiery quality to her technique, while the other had a gentle wit to her own playing. Both brought out the humor in Mozart's music.

The andante wound down gently, as though we were being sung to sleep. But then we were awakened as the third movement got off to a rollicking start.

The sisters know this music intimately, as though they have been having fun with Mozart since childhood, tossing phrases back and forth like some siblings toss a ball. The sold-out crowd loved them.

The second half of the program opened with Mozart's Symphony Number 41 in C Major, "Jupiter," his last, and a masterpiece from the "older" Mozart, who only lived to be 35.

The PSO explored a variety of moods and dynamics with this piece, and at times the sound went from thundering and rousing to a whispering pianissimo.

The third moment in particular featured gorgeous work by the double reeds: simply wonderful playing. The fourth and final movement brought out the virtuosity of the string section, soaring from ferocity to quietude. The "Jupiter Symphony" was capped with an outstanding five-part fugue, a stirring conclusion.

The PSO's Classical Series continues on Saturday and Sunday, October 5 and 6, when guest pianist Natasha Paremski performs Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, in a program that also includes works by Glinka and Tchaikovsky. 609-497-0020 or www.princetonsymphony.org.