



October 7, 2020

Princeton Symphony Orchestra Presents First in Series of Virtual Performances

By Nancy Plum

For the fall portion of its 2020-2021 season, Princeton Symphony Orchestra has designed a hybrid concert schedule of virtual and live performances. The first live concert, featuring a small ensemble of brass players, took place the last week of September at Princeton's Morven Museum and Garden.

PSO presented its opening virtual performance this past Sunday at the ensemble's usual concert time of 4 p.m., but instead of listening raptly in Princeton University's Richardson Auditorium, this event's "concertgoers" were at home gathered around desktop computers, laptops, iPads and iPhones in the Symphony's first presentation of a "Virtual Concerts: Your Orchestra, Your Home" series. Princeton Symphony Orchestra Music Director Rossen Milanov has programmed three virtual concerts for October and November, mixing classical standards with works by contemporary composers.

Sunday afternoon's concert, featuring 11 string players led by Milanov, was recorded earlier this fall at Morven Museum, with instrumentalists well-spaced out in a wood-paneled room which Milanov called a "perfect" venue for these difficult performing times. Following introductory remarks by Milanov and Princeton Symphony Executive Director Marc Uys, the broadcast began with George Walker's *Lyric for Strings*.

American composer George Walker was a pioneer of African American musical performance in this country. The first African American graduate of the Curtis Institute, doctoral recipient from Eastman School of Music, and Pulitzer Prize winner for music, among other accolades, Walker composed a repertory of more than 90 works for orchestra, piano, strings, voice, organ, clarinet, guitar, brass, woodwinds, and chorus. He composed the one-movement *Lyric for Strings* at age 24, before he had achieved a

number of these “firsts,” and this work has endured well over the decades.

Lyric for Strings originated as an internal movement of a string quartet, inspired by the famed *Adagio* string quartet movement of Walker’s Curtis classmate Samuel Barber. Like Barber’s *Adagio*, *Lyric for Strings* took on a life of its own, achieving great popularity in the orchestral arena. Milanov started Walker’s piece quietly, quickly emphasizing the same climbing intensity as can be found in Barber’s *Adagio*. The players were well-blended and well-contained within the Morven space, with precise cutoffs and jarring harmonic chords from the lower strings when required. The varied camera angles included closeups of the instrumentalists, allowing the listeners a view of facial expressions and fingering not always visible in live performance. As high-quality as the technology was in this broadcast, one technical shortcoming was apparent when very quiet moments were hard to hear, especially *pizzicati* from the strings.

Like Walker’s *Lyric for Strings*, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Divertimento in D Major, K. 136* dates from the composer’s youth — in this case, the age of 16. Mozart traveled and performed extensively through Europe from childhood, often absorbing the culture of the countries he visited into his music. He composed the 1772 *Divertimento* after an extended trip to Italy, reflected in the buoyancy and joyfulness of the three-movement piece. This work followed the structure of the 18th-century Italian *sinfonia*, with contrasting moods for each movement, and finesse and elegance throughout.

In Sunday afternoon’s performance, the Princeton Symphony ensemble began the work in a chipper tempo, with clean figures from the violin and a spirited style emphasizing the appropriateness of this piece to a garden setting. The celli provided a steady underpinning, with musical passages passed back and forth between the two violin sections. Milanov brought out well the *sforzandi* of the first movement, and highlighted the courtliness of the second movement *andante*. Throughout the work, repeated sections were played with variety and dynamic contrasts, while transitions between sections were well handled. Again, innovative camera work enabled the listeners to see complicated fingering and bowing from the players.

The Walker and Mozart pieces constituted Princeton Symphony Orchestra’s own participation in Sunday’s concert. When this program was originally scheduled, pianist Inon Barnatan was to have joined the Symphony to perform his own transcription of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s orchestral *Symphonic Dances*. Rather than perform in Princeton, Barnatan was featured in a performance of this transcription recorded this past summer, in the Baker-Baum Concert Hall in La Jolla, California. Prior to this broadcast, Barnatan and Milanov engaged in a discussion of Barnatan’s transcription of Rachmaninoff’s *Symphonic Dances*, originally composed for large orchestra and arranged by Rachmaninoff himself for two

pianos. Although Rachmaninoff can be heard playing the *Dances* on a single piano in a 1940 clandestine recording made at Philadelphia Orchestra conductor Eugene Ormandy's house, Barnatan's work transcribing the three-movement symphonic piece is the first substantial and authoritative transcription. In their pre-performance discussion, Barnatan, from his home in California (complete with a Labrador-type dog in the background), and Milanov discussed Rachmaninoff's borrowing of themes from his other works and Russian liturgical music to incorporate into the *Dances* and an interpretation of the piece as a summation of Rachmaninoff's life.

Performing his transcription in a state-of-the-art acoustic hall, Barnatan immediately brought out the quirkiness and intensity of Rachmaninoff's writing. The first movement was Russian in its percussive nature, yet Barnatan was light on the pedal to accentuate the crispness of the rhythm. The demonic nature of the complex piano part was evident from the start, evidenced by the lightning-speed fingering visible onscreen. Barnatan played the lush slower sections with fluidity and song-like character, highlighting the poignancy of the music. The second movement *andante* was particularly ghostly — one could almost see skeletons waltzing in the haunting style. Listeners could also hear in the piano part the tubular bells which are so prevalent in Russian music. The camera work of this broadcast enabled the audience to see Barnatan's fingers racing up and down the keyboard, as well as the actual music on Barnatan's iPad.

Sunday afternoon's virtual performance was an experiment for Princeton Symphony, but one which could clearly work as the ensemble works to keep its audience engaged in orchestral music this fall.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra will present its next virtual performance on Sunday, October 18 at 4 p.m. Featured in this performance will be cellist Pablo Ferrández in music of Simon, Bach, and Shostakovich. A wind quintet from the Symphony will present a live chamber concert on Thursday, October 8 at 5:30 p.m. at Princeton's Morven Museum and Garden. Featured in this concert will be music of Barber, Ibert, and Gershwin. Information about both of these events can be obtained by calling the Princeton Symphony Orchestra at (609) 497-0020 or by visiting princetonorchestra.org.

Tweet

Save

Like 0