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## Princeton Symphony Orchestra Concludes Fall Virtual Concert Season with Stellar Violinist

By Nancy Plum

Princeton Symphony Orchestra presented the sixth and final concert in its fall “indoor/outdoor” classical season this past Sunday afternoon by digitally launching a virtual performance led by the ensemble’s Assistant Conductor Nell Flanders. Flanders, recently named to this position with the Symphony, led members of the Symphony’s string sections in a performance also featuring noted violinist Elina Vähälä. With the orchestral portions filmed at Princeton’s Morven Education Center and Vähälä’s Bach solo recorded at the Church of St. Olaf in the southern Finnish town of Sysmä, Flanders and the 11 string players of the Symphony presented a concert which was a tribute to both the Baroque era and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century America.

Born in America’s Deep South at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, composer Florence Price emerged from the violent racial atmosphere of the time to become a musical pioneer whose music has only recently begun to receive much-deserved attention. Much of Price’s repertory was lost after her death, but was rediscovered in an attic of an abandoned house in rural Illinois. Price composed her 1929 *String Quartet* only as a two-movement work, and it is thought that this piece was not heard between Price’s death in 1953 and a performance in 2015. In Sunday afternoon’s concert, Princeton Symphony presented the second movement *andante moderato*, rooted in the vocal spiritual tradition.

The string players of Princeton Symphony began Price’s *String Quartet* movement with a lush melody they could really sink their musical teeth into, as Flanders conducted with broad strokes without a baton to emphasize the richness of the melodic material. This was the kind of music in which the players could load up on vibrato, however the ensemble resisted this temptation and played with a lean yet rich sound, especially in a viola sectional solo from Stephanie Griffin and Emily Muller. Flanders milked the

movement's *rubatos* well, and although this work was composed in a turbulent time period, the broad melodic passages were full of hope and opportunity.

Violinist Elina Vähälä was born in the United States, raised in Finland, and has appeared with orchestras worldwide while maintaining a strong commitment to music education in Finland. The Viuluakatemia Ry violin academy, which she founded in 2009 in Finland, serves as a master class-based educational initiative for talented young Finnish violinists. Vähälä was supposed to have appeared with Princeton Symphony this season in a performance of Jean Sibelius' *Violin Concerto*, but instead presented a pre-recorded performance from a small church in the lake region of Finland. For this performance, Vähälä chose one of Johann Sebastian Bach's most well-known works for unaccompanied violin, but one which included some of the most intricate music the composer wrote. Bach's *Partita for Violin #2 in D minor, BWV 1004* was structured in a five-movement dance format common in Bach's time. The concluding *chaconne* is a four-bar melodic ground bass repeated 64 times over which the upper strings spin a continuous series of variations in a close to 15-minute movement.

Vähälä began the work dramatically, as if making a statement that the music has arrived. Playing on a 1780 Giovanni Batista Guadagnini violin, Vähälä well-handled the technical challenges of the piece, with flying figures and running passages as the music became more complex, and played as if she had all the time in the world to perform this piece. Eighteenth-century works in this genre may well have been played on an organ with multiple keyboards or by ensembles with multiple instruments, but Vähälä brought out all the musical effects on a single violin, adding a bit of Romanticism with the use of *rubato* and by stretching cadences.

Although composed in 1884, Edvard Grieg's *Holberg Suite* pays homage to Bach's era in its structure as a set of dance movements. Norwegian writer Ludvig Baron Holberg, for whose bicentennial the work was composed, was a contemporary of Bach and Handel, and Grieg chose to honor the writer with a French Baroque period suite. Originally composed for piano and later transcribed for strings by the composer himself, this piece is a five-movement set of dances heavily laden with French Baroque musical devices. The Princeton Symphony players presented the galloping prelude with crisp dotted rhythms and a teasing first violin part. The graceful and courtly "sarabande" featured an elegant solo melody from cellist Robert Burkhart, with Burkhart and violist Griffin providing fluid duet passages. The players kept rhythms precise throughout the work, closing the *Suite* with a brisk and playful "rigaudon," based on a 17<sup>th</sup>-century French folk dance.

As Princeton Symphony Orchestra closes its fall "virtual season," the Symphony has managed to maintain a high-quality artistic experience within an unusual framework. Thanks to imaginative camera work, audience members could watch the players watching

the conductor perhaps learning a bit about string technique in bowing and fingering, and at least a portion of the ensemble was able to present live music. The Symphony's calendar for the spring includes a return to live performances — one can only hope.

*Princeton Symphony Orchestra will present a series of free virtual Holiday Pops performances from December 5-20. Information about accessing these events can be found on the ensemble's website at [princetonsymphony.org](http://princetonsymphony.org).*

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