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Princeton Symphony Orchestra Presents Virtual Concert of Chamber and Piano Music

By Nancy Plum

Princeton Symphony Orchestra continued its virtual concert series with a broadcast performance this past weekend of Classical-era chamber works and solo piano music. Led by Music Director Rossen Milanov, Sunday afternoon's concert provided cozy music for a winter afternoon.

18th-century French composer Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, was almost as famous for his background as for his music. A contemporary of Mozart, Saint-Georges was born in the West Indies an illegitimate son of a wealthy French nobleman and his slave. Contrary to the customs of the time, Saint-Georges' father took Joseph and his mother to Paris, where he was well educated in music and athletics. Saint-Georges simultaneously pursued careers in music and fencing, eventually serving in the court of Louis XV and becoming a music teacher of Marie Antoinette. Despite his support from the monarchy, Saint-Georges sided with the revolutionaries in the French Revolution and was later arrested as an enemy of the people. And like Mozart, despite his fame in music circles, Saint-Georges died poor and in obscurity.

Although much of Saint-Georges' music was lost in the French Revolution, orchestras have recently turned their attention to his symphonic works. Rooted in the compositional style of Haydn, Saint-Georges' 1779 *Symphony No. 1 in G Major* captured the light and playful musical atmosphere of late 18th-century France. In a performance recorded earlier this year in the education center of Princeton's Morven Museum and Garden, eleven members of Princeton Symphony Orchestra, led by Milanov, played the three-movement *Symphony* emphasizing the music's simplicity and charm. In the first movement, subtle winds accompanied string sections busy with motivic melodic material and musical teasing. First violinists Basia Danilow, Margaret Banks and Ruotao

Mao led a graceful dialog among the instruments in the second movement *andante*. Saint-Georges may have been a violin virtuoso, but he composed the violin parts of this *Symphony* with delicacy and elegance in mind.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Rondo in D Major* for solo piano was particularly known for its opening Scottish "snap," a syncopated dance rhythm derived from the Scottish "strathspey." Featured in this work on Sunday afternoon was Ukrainian pianist Alexander Gavrylyuk, who has recorded the technically challenging *concerti* of such Russian composers as Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff. Performing from his home in Amsterdam, Gavrylyuk played Mozart's one-movement work with light fingering, dynamic contrasts, and a playful character, keeping the shorter notes crisp and bringing out a sense of drama in the piece.

For his "mini-recital" with Princeton Symphony, Gavrylyuk contrasted the sunny Mozart *Rondo* with two *intermezzi* of 19th-century composer Johannes Brahms. Among the last works Johannes Brahms composed, the three short piano pieces which comprise *Opus 117* are considered personal musical "monologues" of the composer. The composer himself described *Intermezzo No. 3* as a "lullaby of all my griefs." In the first work played, *Intermezzo No. 2*, Gavrylyuk took his time with the melodic lines and one could hear the sorrow in the music as the piece became more technically difficult. Gavrylyuk began *Intermezzo No. 3* close to the keyboard, playing the simple opening line introspectively. As in the second *Intermezzo*, this piece turned more hopeful, and Gavrylyuk tied the varied moods of the music together well.

Gavrylyuk turned in a completely different direction for the closing piece of his "mini-recital" with a *Toccata* by 20th-century Ukrainian composer Arkady Filippenko. Filippenko's grandfather was a shepherd who played and made pastoral instruments, which Filippenko also learned to play. During the Second World War, Filippenko served in a military orchestra of the Red Army, and subsequently became a significant composer in the Ukraine. His *Toccata* for solo piano drew from the improvisatory 16th-century form carried through three centuries by composers ranging from Bach to Ravel.

Toccatas by definition are free-form and often given to technical fireworks, and Filippenko's work was demonic from the outset. Throughout the piece, Gavrylyuk displayed complex technical skill, with crossed hands and intermingled fingers. As the work closed, it was as if Gavrylyuk's hands were moving too fast to be recorded.

Milanov and Princeton Symphony Orchestra closed their winter concert with a return to Mozart and his 1784 *Serenade for Winds in C minor*. Although the 18th-century *Serenade* was used as light entertainment background music, this particular work was dark in instrumentation and key. Princeton Symphony performed

the *Serenade* with pairs of oboes, clarinets, bassoons and horns, well highlighting the musical dialogs among the pairs of instruments. The ensemble playing in the four movements of the *Serenade* was marked by graceful solos by oboist Lillian Copeland and clarinetist Pascal Archer, as the lower wind instruments provided solid and well-blended support. In the final movement theme and variations, Copeland provided an especially refined ornamented melodic line, and the ensemble closed the work and concert with a final joyous variation.

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