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Princeton Symphony Orchestra Collaborates With South African Ensemble for Virtual Concert

By Nancy Plum

Since the weather has turned cold, it has become difficult for music ensembles to comfortably record concerts, yet audiences are hungry for performances. Princeton Symphony Orchestra found a way to brighten up the winter by partnering with South Africa's Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble, which offers high-quality string teaching to underprivileged youth in the township of Soweto outside of Johannesburg. Princeton Symphony launched the first of its virtual five-concert on-demand series featuring the Buskaid String Ensemble this past weekend, presenting a wide range of classical and South African music.

Buskaid: A Musical Miracle—Brilliant Baroque to Cool Kwela! was curated by Buskaid's founder and music director Rosemary Nalden. This past weekend's concert, launched Friday through Sunday, was comprised of Buskaid archival concert material filmed from 2014 to 2019 in the Linder Auditorium of the Wits Education Center in Johannesburg. In these performances, up to 35 string and percussion players, together with vocalists and led by conductor Nalden, presented works of the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as pieces from South Africa's rich musical tradition.

The Buskaid String Ensemble programmed this concert chronologically, beginning with several works by early 18th-century French composer Jean-Philippe Rameau. The Ensemble's performance of Rameau's "Overture" to the composer's opera *Naïs* and two dance movements from the opera *Dardanus* immediately showed the versatility and skill of the musicians through effective dynamic contrasts, musical lines always moving forward and crisp playing from the lower strings. These three works contained a great deal of repetition in notes and phrasing, which the ensemble played with variety and attention to detail. In a nod to the String Ensemble's South African roots, the "Overture" to *Naïs* was accompanied by a *djembe* — an

African goblet drum played with bare hands which certainly would not have been part of Rameau's original concept, but which added rhythmic snap to the performance.

One of the highlights of this virtual concert was the String Ensemble's presentation of the fourth movement "Rondeau Allegro" of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 13 in C Major, featuring Singapore-born British pianist Melvyn Tan. Tan's fluid and animated performance surely made audiences wonder where this pianist has been all this time and why we have not heard more from him. Playing close to the keyboard, Tan teased the orchestra relentlessly, daring the players to imitate his impeccable phrasing, and both Orchestra and soloist ended the movement with grace and delicacy.

The Buskaid String Ensemble featured a number of their own musicians as soloists in this concert, among them violist Tiisetso Mashishi, a Buskaid alumnus who grew up in the Diepkloof zone of Soweto and received his musical degree from London's Royal Academy of Music. Mashishi performed with the String Ensemble in Max Bruch's *Romanze for Solo Viola and Orchestra*. In this piece, Mashishi drew out the long lines well and executed the numerous triplet figures with clarity, while Nalden maintained a languid and unhurried tempo with the accompanying string ensemble.

The String Ensemble closed the "classical" portion of its concert with a performance of British composer Julian Grant's *Sancho's Dance Mix*, a suite for string orchestra based on the music of 18th-century composer Ignatius Sancho. Born on a slave ship in the Atlantic Ocean, Sancho ran away from his owner in Greenwich, England, and was taken under the wing of the Duke of Montagu, eventually making his way up through British society. Sancho's dance music, as set in Grant's three three-movement *Dance Mix*, was courtly and graceful, with the musicians of Buskaid playing as a well-focused and tight ensemble.

Several other Buskaid members were highlighted as vocal soloists, including Cecelia Manyama, Mathapelo Matabane, and Tumi Mapholo. Manyama and Mathapelo paid tribute to American vocal legend Nina Simone by performing her signature songs and arrangements. Manyama sang "I Love your Lovin' Ways" with a slinky vocal style backed up by the women of the String Ensemble and light percussion. Matabane displayed a rich alto voice in singing Simone's arrangement of Judy Collins' "My Father," accompanied by luxuriant strings. Mapholo sang in a clean baritone voice in a jazzy arrangement of Cole Porter's "Too Darn Hot."

The Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble closed this past weekend's virtual concert by turning its attention to selections of *Kwela*, a style rooted in South African pennywhistle street music. The Ensemble performed a set of *Kwela* folk songs, including one of South Africa's unofficial anthems. Winston Ngozi's 1968 "Yakhal' Inkomo" embodied the underground spirit and dispossessed feelings of the

age of high apartheid, and Ngozi’s album containing this song became the most iconic South African jazz recording of all time. In Buskaid’s performance, Mathapelo Matabane performed the tune in a slow jazz rhythm, accompanied by drum and offbeat accents from the celli, allowing the words of the poem to come through. The closing set of “Malaika” songs was presented by a trio of singers (Manyama, Tshegofatso Matabane, and Mapholo) and the String Ensemble with the well-choreographed movement which is inseparable from South African music and rapid-fire diction.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra has taken the Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble under its musical wing — from a board of trustees trip to South Africa in 2019 to presenting these five concerts as a way of bringing both attention to the Buskaid organization’s programs and a new musical and educational experience to the Princeton Symphony audience. This five-concert series will no doubt accomplish both goals, demonstrating how old-school musical traditions continue to thrive in a country which has been constantly changing.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra will launch the next Buskaid — A Musical Miracle online performance on Friday, February 26, to run through Sunday, February 28. Subtitled Soulful and Scintillating Solos, this concert will feature music of Mozart, Bloch, and Saint-Saëns, as well as popular music, performed by soloists from the Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble. Ticket information about accessing this performance is available on the Princeton Symphony Orchestra website at princetonsymphony.org.

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