



March 10, 2021

Princeton Symphony Orchestra Performs Music of Respighi and Puccini in Virtual Concert

By Nancy Plum

Princeton Symphony Orchestra returned to its virtual classical concert series this past weekend with a performance highlighting music of the Italian masters for strings. Sunday afternoon's program also featured Russian harpist Alexander Boldachev, who was scheduled to perform live in Princeton this season, in works of Bedřich Smetana and Astor Piazzolla, as well as two of his own compositions.

Ottorino Respighi's *Ancient Airs and Dances* was a set of three orchestral suites from the early 20th-century Italian composer, inspired by lute and guitar music of the 16th through 18th centuries. In a concert recorded last fall in Princeton's Morven Museum and Garden, Princeton Symphony performed the third of these suites, which was comprised of four baroque musical dances and which was unusual in its scoring for strings alone.

Led by Princeton Symphony Orchestra Music Director Rossen Milanov, the strings of the Orchestra began the opening dance of "Suite III" gracefully. The upper strings maintained a great deal of forward motion to the melodic lines, accompanied by delicate pizzicato playing from the lower strings. Throughout the "Suite," one could easily hear the plucking of a 17th-century lute. The strings well handled the complex shifting of styles in the second movement "Aire di Corte," well capturing a rustic dance atmosphere. An elegant lilt marked the third movement "Siciliana," and the Orchestra closed the stylish work with a rich orchestral texture similar to a Baroque organ.

Harpist Alexander Boldachev is one of these musicians who has taken an instrument historically classified one way and moved it into new realms. He has both transcribed a number of works from other orchestrations to the harp and promoted arrangements for the instrument by other composers. In Sunday afternoon's "mini-

recital,” previously recorded in Boldachev’s home in St. Petersburg, Russia, the innovative harpist performed the second movement of Czech composer Smetana’s *Má Vlast* (My Country), as arranged for harp by Czech composer Hanuš Trnecek.

Writing in the 19th-century, composer Smetana rode a wave of nationalism with music reflecting the Czech musical identity, especially his well-known *Má Vlast*. Composed in 1874, this set of six symphonic poems depicted the countryside and history of Smetana’s native Bohemia. The second movement *The Moldau* musically illustrates the course of the region’s longest river as it begins as a stream and wends its way through the Bohemian Forest. In his performance of Smetana’s music, Boldachev’s fast and lithe right hand well depicted the river as it tripped over rocks. The work’s familiar theme was clean, with delicacy added by the upper strings of the harp and a glasslike musical quality from the numerous *glissandi*. One advantage to the online performance was the ability to see the performer’s hands close up, and audiences could well appreciate his exceptional technical expertise.

Boldachev has also composed original works for the harp, and paid tribute Sunday afternoon to the live concert that could not take place with a piece inspired by Princeton University’s motto: “*Dei Sub Numine Viget*” (“Under God’s Spirit She Flourishes”). Boldachev’s improvisatory piece on this theme reflected the busyness of the University campus in normal times, with the sounds of bells and ice crystals falling from the collegiate buildings. Composed in a tonal harmony with a great deal of *glissandi*, Boldachev’s piece maintained an elegant flow and majestic character.

Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla is renowned for having moved the tango from the dance hall to the concert hall. Composed in 1973 and inspired by Piazzolla’s Italian travels, *Libertango* is marked by driving ostinato rhythms and soaring melodies. This piece, as arranged for solo harp by Boldachev, displayed a great deal of bending the tempo to create the sensuality of the tango. Boldachev kept a percussive rhythm going on the wooden frame of the harp, and effortlessly raced up and down scales, while bringing out elements of jazz in the lower strings of the instrument.

The strings of Princeton Symphony closed Sunday’s virtual concert with a performance of Giacomo Puccini’s single-movement string elegy *I Crisantemi*, a popular work during this period of small ensemble performance. Conducting with broad gestures, Milanov effectively led the strings through the mournful atmosphere of the piece, eliciting a rich sound from all instruments. The second section was particularly languorous in character, and the ensemble came together well in dramatic fashion to close the work. In combining the refinement and lushness of the Italian school with the varied colors and textures of the harp, Princeton Symphony Orchestra well succeeded in presenting a late-afternoon interlude to musically launch the Princeton community into spring.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra's virtual performances for March include "Bach's Musical Offering," a free event launched on March 10; and the Orchestra's third collaboration with Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble, a ticketed virtual concert presented March 26-28. Information about these events can be found at princetonsymphony.org.

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