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Princeton Symphony Orchestra Presents Second Virtual Collaboration with South African String Ensemble

By Nancy Plum

Princeton Symphony Orchestra continued its musical partnership with the Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble of South Africa this past week with a concert entitled *Soulful and Scintillating Solos*, launched Friday and running through the weekend. The Buskaid concert included works of classical composers Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ernest Bloch, and Camille Saint-Saëns, along with American popular music and traditional South African selections. As with the first Soweto String Ensemble broadcast earlier this winter, the performance featured members of the Ensemble as instrumental and vocal soloists.

It is difficult to imagine that one of Mozart's most iconic chamber works was composed as "background" music to an 18th-century social event, but that may well be the case with the popular *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. Composed in 1787, this four-movement work was likely intended by the composer as a nocturno, a chamber piece played late at night at a social gathering. Mozart appears to have given the piece its famous subtitle to differentiate it from a serenade, played earlier in the evening. Regardless of the work's genesis, the musical themes of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* have remained among Mozart's most recognizable.

Led by conductor Rosemary Nalden and playing from memory, the string players of the Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble played the first movement of Mozart's *Nachtmusik* crisply and decisively, leaning into *appoggiaturas* and demonstrating graceful dynamic swells. Nalden provided effectively supple conducting gestures when required, and the players communicated well among themselves, showing that they had been playing together for a long time. This performance was taken from a 2019 archive, recorded

(as were all the works on this program) in the Linder Auditorium of the Wits Education Campus in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Soweto String Ensemble violinist Mzwandile Twala was featured in a 2018 archival performance of Ernest Bloch's *Nigun*, arranged by contemporary French pianist Yves Henry. Composed in 1923, *Nigun* is the second piece of *Baal Shem: Three Pictures of Hassidic Life* triptych, which Bloch composed in memory of his mother. Soloist Twala began playing violin at the age of 3 and has studied violin and chamber music in the United Kingdom as well as through the Buskaid curriculum. The word "Nigun" refers to improvisation or melody, and throughout the one-movement piece, Twala maintained the improvisatory flavor of the music within a dark and mournful character. The solo part of the second section was Gypsy-like, accompanied by punctuation from the orchestra alternating between pointed and delicate. Both String Ensemble and Twala maintained relentless intensity throughout the work in a continuous stream of sound, as the piece effectively faded away at the end.

Nineteenth-century Spanish composer Pablo de Sarasate is not as well-known as other Romantic-era composers for solo violin, but Sarasate stretched the repertory with *Navarra*, a piece for two solo violins and orchestra. For the 2014 performance of Sarasate's work (as arranged by British composer Michael Pilkington), Buskaid drew on childhood friends and long-time members Simiso Radebe and Kabelo Monnathebe. It was clear in Buskaid's performance of this piece that the technical demands on each soloist were equal — Sarasate's work is truly a showcase for two virtuoso violins. Radebe and Monnathebe were frequently in clean and well-tuned thirds through the piece, while conductor Nalden led the orchestral accompaniment in a lively 6/8 tempo. The two soloists almost always played in tandem, with one or the other occasionally breaking into lightning-speed scales, leading to a swirling finish.

Pianist Melvyn Tan once again was showcased with the String Ensemble in a 2018 archival recording of Camille Saint Saëns' *Wedding Cake — Caprice-Valse for Piano and Strings*. The piece started right off with solo piano, as Tan played flowing scales with relentless energy. Throughout the work, Tan played with a light touch and great attention to accuracy, with the Ensemble providing graceful accompaniment.

For the closing half of the concert, the Soweto String Ensemble turned its attention to popular music of both America and South Africa. Vocal soloist Mathapelo Matabane performed songs of Irving Berlin and Rodgers & Hart expressively, followed by a rich interpretation of the traditional spiritual "Sinnerman" as arranged by Nina Simone, from concerts recorded in 2016 and 2017. Matabane was well accompanied in these songs by the String Ensemble, some of whom also sang in the Simone arrangement, and proved herself again to be a break-out star of the Buskaid program. The South African pieces presented were spirited and full of movement by the players, especially "Kwela Kwela," featuring vocalists

Cecelia Manyama and Tumi Mapholo. In this selection, the string players demonstrated an amazing ability to play and dance simultaneously, clearly enjoying themselves thoroughly while showing the depth of talent within the Soweto String Ensemble.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra will present its next virtual concert on Sunday, March 7 at 4 p.m. Led by PSO Music Director Rossen Milanov and featuring harpist Alexander Boldachev, this concert will include music of Respighi, Smetana, Piazzolla, and Puccini, as well as two works by harpist Boldachev. The Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble will be featured again March 26-28, with music of Vaughan Williams, Mussorgsky, and Grieg. Information about accessing these performances can be found on the Princeton Symphony website at princetonsymphony.org.

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