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Classical Music Review: Princeton Symphony Orchestra

By Susan Van Dongen

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Having just heard the Princeton Symphony Orchestra's first indoor concert in more than 18 months, I can truly say they have not missed a beat.

For safety/social-distancing reasons, the PSO's current venue is the Matthews Theatre at the McCarter Theatre Center. Yes, there were a few new protocols to absorb, for example, the printed program was available online or via QR code. Tickets were also virtual or printed out and scanned. Concertgoers showed proof of vaccination and identification, and we all wore masks inside as well.

Any minor inconveniences were worth it.

Music director and conductor Rossen Milanov noted that the PSO's annual fall debut traditionally opens with "The Star Spangled Banner." This year, however, the orchestra performed "Banner," a work by African-American composer Jessie Montgomery (born 1981).

Integrating a range of musical and historical sources from various world anthems and patriotic songs, all of which represent our nation of plurality, "Banner" was written in 2014 as a tribute to the 200th anniversary of the national anthem.

It's a surprising new take on Francis Scott Key's work, giving a nod to the myriad of sounds and ethnic styles various people have brought to our country.

As the piece took off with a modernistic flair, breaking down the familiar melody of the anthem, we heard a bit of Leonard Bernstein here, a Spanish influence there, even a brief flash of folk music. The busy beginning of "Banner" shifted into a long, quiet passage, then a kind of "found music," with plucked strings, bass violinists rapping on their instruments, even foot stomping.

A close listen revealed "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (by James Weldon Johnson, and commonly known as the Black National Anthem), woven into the texture of the piece. The snare drum and syncopated strings built and built, bringing "Banner" to a sudden finish.

The concert continued with Felix Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor, featuring soloist Simone Porter in a remarkable performance.

Sporting a burgundy jumpsuit, Porter seized upon the unusual way the Mendelssohn concerto opens. There is no orchestral introduction or exposition, the solo violin just launches into a familiar, bittersweet melody.



Simone Porter was the violin soloist for Felix Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor.

The first movement (*Allegro molto passionato*) requires both soloist and orchestra to play with vigor and precision, and the PSO did so easily and with elegance. Porter executed the break-neck passages with a passion, leaning into her instrument, even swaying at times. Yet, she was never out of control, mastering even the highest registers of the instrument.

After all these musical fireworks, there was a brief moment of calm, shared with the woodwinds. This allowed us all to take a breath, and served as a bridge to the second movement.

We were treated to a hushed and familiar melody, lulled into relaxation before the third movement (*Allegro molto vivace*) took off again, on another spirited romp. Plucked strings and playful melodies were passed between the solo violinist and the woodwinds, and the combination was effervescent. The final segment showcased how superbly the PSO accompanies its special guests, never overwhelming a soloist.

The second half of the concert featured Beethoven's Fourth Symphony, a lesser acknowledged "middle child," written in 1806 between the revolutionary Third Symphony, "Eroica," and the iconic Fifth Symphony. Music historians have noted that the Fourth reflects Haydn's influence on Beethoven, who stayed within musical boundaries with this work, rather than trying to break new ground.

You could easily hear the classical aesthetic in the lighthearted motifs traded between the bassoon and flute. But this piece really belongs to the strings, ebbing and flowing from grandeur to almost silence.

The second movement introduced gentle musings on a melody, carried again by the woodwinds — Andy Cho on clarinet, flutist Yevgeny Faniuk, and especially Brad Balliett on bassoon. The symphony rolls on with a third movement in a lively triple meter, rollicking almost.

Then, if Beethoven was holding back his enormous energy early in this composition, we heard it in the finale (*Allegro vivace*), which featured masterful playing of this fast-paced music, and the full, rich volume of the PSO.

Rossen Milanov conducts the Princeton Symphony Orchestra's next concert, Thursday, November 4, 7:30 p.m. at McCarter Theater. It will feature pianist Shai Wosner, performing Mozart's Piano Concerto, K. 450, as well as Schubert's "Tragic" Symphony and Evan Williams' "The Dream Deferred." Tickets cost \$25-\$90. 609-497-0020 or www.princetonsymphony.org.

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