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Princeton Symphony Orchestra Returns to Live Indoor Performance

By Nancy Plum

After a year of innovative and imaginative outdoor and online programming, Princeton Symphony Orchestra invited audiences back to hear the ensemble in person and indoors this past weekend at McCarter Theatre Center's Matthews Theatre. Joined by solo violinist Simone Porter, Princeton Symphony, at full strength and led by Music Director Rossen Milanov, performed music of Beethoven and Mendelssohn, as well as a piece by contemporary American composer Jessie Montgomery.

Orchestras often begin the first concert of the new season with the "Star-Spangled Banner." In this celebration of restarting indoor concerts with a live audience, Milanov chose to open Sunday afternoon's performance with a contemporary setting of this country's national anthem — one which represents the wide diversity of populations within this nation with musical inspirations drawn from a variety of American sources.

New York native Jessie Montgomery is one of this country's most prominent up-and-coming composers and one with strong local connections. Currently a graduate fellow in music composition at Princeton University, she has been commissioned extensively by musical organizations nationwide. Montgomery's 2014 *Banner* was commissioned to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the American national anthem "The Star-Spangled Banner." In this piece, Montgomery created a rhapsody on the anthem, designed to capture what Montgomery describes as the "contradictions, leaps and bounds, and milestones that allow us to celebrate and maintain the tradition of our ideals."

Princeton Symphony Orchestra began Montgomery's work with shimmering in the violins, contrasted with fragments of the familiar national anthem melody from other instruments. The violins were lean, and the lower winds well-blended, and the ensemble played cleanly in the acoustic of Matthews Theatre. A string quintet within

the orchestra, comprised of the principal players of each string section, conveyed melodic material well, and an understated brass color was provided in some passages by hornist Jonathan Clark.

Solo violinist Simone Porter began her professional career at age 10 and has been performing with orchestras both nationwide and internationally ever since. This past year, Porter was active with recorded streamed events, not losing any momentum in her remarkable career. Playing on a 1740 Italian instrument, Porter joined Princeton Symphony for Felix Mendelssohn's last great orchestral work — Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in E Minor — exploring the composer's unique manner of fusing solo instrument and ensemble.

The acoustics at Matthews Theatre differed from those of Richardson Auditorium, Princeton Symphony Orchestra's usual performance home, with the Symphony seeming as if it were further away from the audience than at Richardson. Porter began the first movement of the three-movement Concerto playing with a sound that was not overly bright in the hall but was crystal clear in the running melodic lines. She took her time on the first movement cadenza, emphasizing a Romantic lower register of the instrument and demonstrating great technical agility in her playing. Porter added more vibrato in the hymn-like second movement, building intensity slowly. Both soloist and orchestra demonstrated great attention to creating variety in the repetition of phrases and dynamic effects. In this work, Porter consistently showed her command of the solo part, while the Symphony provided precise accompaniment.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra closed Sunday afternoon's concert with a refreshing choice to welcome back a live audience. Conducting from memory, Milanov led the ensemble in Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 4 in B-flat Major, no doubt selected as part of the composer's 250th birthday celebration — most of which was lost in the pandemic. Although from Beethoven's "Middle Period," this Symphony owes a debt to symphonic master Franz Josef Haydn in its slow and mysterious introduction to the first movement and playful joy of the closing finale. Throughout the work, Milanov kept the ensemble clean in sound, with the opening theme of the first movement played detached and the musical palette light and airy. The musicians played the "Adagio" introduction to the first movement gently, building intensity slowly as the strings crept up and down arpeggios.

Milanov took the "Adagio" second movement in a quick tempo, effectively playing with dynamics and intensity. This movement was particularly marked by Andy Cho's elegant clarinet solo, as well as well-tuned thirds between the violin sections. Swirling strings opened the closing movement, with each musical section delicately cadenced and intensity well maintained until the ends of phrases. The strings consistently played leanly, and always with direction. Toward the end of the movement, both strings and winds were playing incredibly fast, closing a concert which showed that

although performing live is by no means out of the woods, it was certainly good to be back.

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