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Princeton Symphony Orchestra opens season with vibrant ‘Fandango’ concert

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Violinist Anne Akiko Meyers performed with the Princeton Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Rossen Milanov, Sept. 10 and 11.

The Princeton Symphony Orchestra kicked off its 2022-23 season with “Fandango,” a joyful and expressive concert of modern and classic dance rhythms featuring the polished beauty of American violinist Anna Akiko Meyers, Sept. 10-11 (I attended on Sept. 11).

Concert-goers were treated to Arturo Márquez’s exhilarating “Fandango” violin concerto and Marcos Fernández’s eclectic “America” symphonic work, in its United States premiere. The two works highlighted the PSO’s renewed commitment to presenting premieres of lesser-known, innovative works by living composers and a more inclusive repertoire.

The concerts were held at Richardson Auditorium, the symphony’s intimate, historic home base on Princeton University’s campus. PSO’s executive director, Marc Uys, took the stage to welcome concertgoers back to its first full season since the pandemic began. The season features top soloists in orchestral, pops, and chamber music programs. Uys also announced the five-year contract extension of Edward T. Cone music director Rossen Milanov, who has been in the role since June 2009 and is the symphony’s third music director.

The Bulgarian-born maestro coaxed fantastic shades of French Impressionistic light and air from Joaquín Turina’s “Danzas fantásticas,” a 1919 work inspired by a Jose Más novel in which each movement echoes Spanish folk music and dances from different regions. The first movement of burnished brass, *Exaltación*, gave way to the luxurious woodwinds of *Ensueño*.

The PSO excelled at the program’s electrifying, high-gloss, majestic works. The lively prelude to Ruperto Chapí’s 1897 “La Revoltosa,” a one-act zarzuela by the Spanish composer, read like a quicksilver *bel canto* overture of exuberant percussion and timpani, and dexterous strings.

Márquez’s banner “Fandango” violin concerto was inspired by his love of the Mexican Fandango dance music he listened to with his father, a mariachi violinist. The violin lends itself naturally to mariachi music, with its voice as the singer’s voice.

Meyers, who took the stage in a red strapless gown, was well-suited to Márquez’s musical language. She plays an exquisitely shaped instrument with a rich, powerful temperament: the Ex-Vieuxtemps Guarneri del Gesù, dated 1741, in triple-mint condition, which belonged to the Belgium violinist Henri Vieuxtemps. In 2013, the historic violin was sold to an anonymous buyer for an undisclosed amount in excess of \$16 million, and Meyers was granted a lifetime loan.

The majority of surviving del Gesù violins are owned by museums and foundations, so this was a rare and splendid opportunity to hear one live. Meyers showed off all the charms of her instrument with its profound depth, powerful projection, colossal range and immense color.

The Márquez commission began in 2018 when Meyers pitched him a new work of Mexican music for violin and orchestra after being swept away by his vibrant “Danzón No. 2” orchestral work. The prolific Mexican composer, a longtime admirer of Meyers’ musicality, was game. He composed the 30-minute piece between 2020 and 2021 and premiered it last year with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, led by Gustavo Dudamel. For Meyers, these big projects of actively expanding the modern repertoire are integral to her creative vision. She has a 20-year track record of commissioning new cadenzas, arrangements and works by living composers such as John Corigliano and Wynton Marsalis.

Meyers’ virtuosity and discipline was on full display. From a technical standpoint, Márquez’s work is like Beethoven’s challenging, physically demanding Violin Concerto. It’s loaded with diverse rhythms and repetitions and its Mariachi-adjacent phrases and Spanish themes are a *prestissimo* marathon of speed and endurance.

The first movement, *Folia Tropical*, set down the motifs of the Portuguese and Spanish ancient dances. Meyers’ mastery of dynamics, tone, octaves and phrasing illustrated the full range of melodic expressions in Márquez’s narrative arc. In the more introspective *Plegaria* movement of the Huapango Nariachi mixed with the Spanish Fandango, she added some varied vibrato accessories to amplify the color.

During the final *Fandanguito* movement of the famous Fandanguito Huasteco, Meyers tapped her foot along to the brisk tempos. Her playing had ravishing, polished color and her lightning-fast bowing boasted fluid, flexible, smooth-as-silk changes. Her pianissimos within each phrase were delicate but sonorous.



Anne Akiko Meyers performs with Rossen Milanov and the Princeton Symphony Orchestra at Princeton University’s Richardson Auditorium.

After the intermission came the U.S. premiere of Spanish composer Fernández's 2017 "America," commissioned by the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra. The 10-minute orchestral work, in homage to Leonard Bernstein, borrowed on the hemiola, a compositional rhythmic pattern of 3:2, notable in Bernstein's "America" from "West Side Story." Light strings and modest percussion evoked Bernstein's theatrical works from the 1950s and nostalgic Manhattan landscapes, with a final movement inspired by Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring."

The concert concluded with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's "Capriccio espagnol" from 1887. Abundant solo passages showcased the strengths of the orchestra members such as concertmaster Basia Danilow, whose phrases were confident, agile and nuanced. The *Alborada* opened with Bizet-like bravado and built to the final *Fandango asturiano*, a fiery fanfare under Milanov's baton.

For information on upcoming symphony concerts, visit princetonsymphony.org (<https://princetonsymphony.org/>).

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