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Princeton Symphony Orchestra Opens New Season with Evening of Spirited Dance

By Nancy Plum

Princeton Symphony Orchestra (PSO) opened the 2022-23 season in popular dance style, with a concert subtitled “Fandango.” Led by PSO Music Director Rossen Milanov and featuring guest solo violinist Anne Akiko Meyers, this past weekend’s concerts presented works of Spanish and Latin American influence or origin, exploring the wealth of musical ideas from these regions. All of these works had a personal connection for Milanov, who spent 10 years living in Spain.

Saturday night’s performance at Richardson Auditorium (the concert was repeated Sunday afternoon) opened with a piece by an early 20th-century composer with musical roots in both Spain and France. Originally composed for piano, Joaquin Turina’s *Danzas fantásticas, Op. 22* began with dissonant strings over low brass and winds. The melody of the first movement *jota*, a dance from the Spanish region of Aragon, was elegantly presented on English horn by Gilles Cheng.

Under Milanov’s direction, the piece became quite lively with French impressionistic rhythms within the lush orchestration. The somewhat cinematic musical palette was aided by clean horns and well drawn-out cadences. The second movement *zortziko*, from the Basque region, was conveyed with a relaxed musical flow, complemented by oboist Lillian Copeland’s solo playing and a well-blended trio of flutes. The closing movement, infused with the Andalusian *farruca*, presented the melodic material in the winds, including a saucy flute solo by Brendan Dooley and solid lower brass playing.

Milanov and American violinist Anne Akiko Meyers have collaborated a number of times in the past, and she personally invited Mexican composer Arturo Márquez to write a violin concerto. The resulting *Fandango*, premiered by Meyers in August

2021, is three movements reflecting the evolution of the *fandango* dance form, with the solo violin line cutting no corners in technical challenges.

The first movement “Folia Tropical” had an exotic feel from the outset, with solo violin emerging over shimmering orchestral strings. Depicting an ancient dance from Spain and Portugal, the movement was played with Spanish lilt and percussive offbeat rhythms. Meyers’ solo line remained in mid-range, later soaring into the upper registers with fierce intensity. Unique instrumental pairings included solo duets from clarinetist Pascal Archer and harpist André Tarantiles, as well as Meyers’ sweet violin solo line with harp accompaniment. The unison rendition of the thematic material was played forcefully, with Meyers providing contrasting long melodic solo lines.

Milanov and Princeton Symphony maintained an appropriate lilt to the concerto’s middle movement, with bassoonist Brad Balliett and clarinetist Archer providing effective solo lines. The closing movement “Fandanguito” required extensive passages of improvisatory playing from Meyers, with nonstop solo lines against an always steady brass section. Conductor, soloist and Symphony impressively brought this unusual and energizing work to a swirling close.

The second half of the program featured compact works depicting countries and cultures by composers reflecting from other parts of the world. In 2017, when the performing arts arena was celebrating the centennial of Leonard Bernstein, Catalonian composer Marcos Fernández created a work to capture the legacy of the American continent. Fernández’s *America*, which received its U.S. premiere in this past weekend’s concerts, incorporated rhythms, instrumentation and the jazz flavor of Bernstein’s immortal *West Side Story* while paying homage to Latino American music traditions. The quotes from *West Side Story* were self-evident in Princeton Symphony’s crisp performance of this palette of unusual musical effects and colors, and the piece well represented an always-evolving American continent as the music periodically came together in a unified sonority and then split apart in a multitude of directions.

In the same vein but from a different century, Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov looked to Spain to create a work he described as glittering with “dazzling orchestral color.” Rimsky-Korsakov’s 1887 *Capriccio espagnol* was unusual for its time in the ways in which the composer used the orchestra and the sonorities created by pairing instruments not usually heard together and providing solo passages for instruments often relegated to the background. *Capriccio espagnol* began with a bullfighter’s fanfare, as clarinetist Archer and concertmaster Basia Danilow played swirling solos. Almost every principal player in the ensemble had a solo, including English horn player Cheng, hornist Audrey Flores, flutist Dooley, oboist Copeland, and cellist Alistair MacRae. Each soloist took their time with their assigned lines, while the

accompanying orchestra maintained the smooth sonorities. Danilow was especially busy throughout the work with intricate violin solo lines.

Rimsky-Korsakov’s strength as a composer was orchestral colors, which Milanov and Princeton Symphony well maintained through clean harmonies (especially from the horns) contrasting with instrumental solos. Sections and musical moods effectively shifted frequently, and the Symphony’s performance well captured both Spanish spirit and Milanov’s personal connected to the music.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra will present its next Classical Series concert on Saturday, October 15 at 8 p.m. and Sunday, October 16 at 4 p.m. at Richardson Auditorium. These performances will be conducted by Rossen Milanov and will feature music by Jessie Montgomery, Benjamin Britten, and Edward Elgar. Ticket information is available at princetonorchestra.org.

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