



October 19, 2022

## Princeton Symphony Orchestra Presents Finnish Violinist in Crisp Britten Concerto

*By Nancy Plum*

Princeton Symphony Orchestra combined rich orchestral music with the 21st century this past weekend with performances of “Britten & Elgar,” as well as a work by an acclaimed American composer. Under the direction of Music Director Rossen Milanov, Princeton Symphony consistently demonstrated a lean and invigorating sound, well matching the fiery playing of guest solo violinist Elina Vähälä.

Saturday night’s performance at Richardson Auditorium (the concert was repeated Sunday afternoon) began with a 21st-century piece showing the Symphony’s precise string ensemble sound. New York composer Jessie Montgomery’s *Starburst* was brief in length but reflected a blaze of orchestral colors and musical effects. Princeton Symphony’s performance cleanly revealed every musical detail and *pizzicato* among the string sections, with the sound traveling well among the musicians. Montgomery’s piece served as a teaser for the concert’s main event — Benjamin Britten’s Violin Concerto, Op. 15 featuring solo violinist Elina Vähälä. Born in the United States and raised in Finland, Vähälä was considered a “young master soloist” at an early age and has been on the international stage ever since.

Britten’s 1939 Violin Concerto was very different from the concertos of the 18th and 19th centuries, opening with a rhythmic ostinato against lush unison string playing. As in the Montgomery piece, Princeton Symphony’s ensemble sound allowed musical details to come to the forefront, especially André Tarantiles’ harp playing. Vähälä’s solo added complexity to the first movement, with shades of joy in the nonstop solo line. Numerous decisive upbows in the solo violin part added rhythmic drive as Vähälä showed full command of the score. Conductor Milanov kept the musical flow in forward motion within the contrasting styles, particularly in a “role-

reversal” section in which the upper strings played long melodic lines while Vähälä provided strident violin effects.

The second movement “Vivace” was marked by Vähälä’s intense and fiery playing contrasting with a variety of instrumental colors, including bassoons, a trio of trumpets, and solo tuba. Throughout the concerto, the solo violin line demanded the most from Vähälä, including passages of a long melodic line interspersed with *pizzicato* effects from her own instrument which she executed with her left hand. The third movement recalled the Baroque *passacaglia* form, with one variation in particular displaying a majestic feel with the solo violin against a quartet of cleanly-played horns. Vähälä consistently played with a rich tone, always moving to the next phrases and never sounding strident in the highest register of the instrument. Throughout the concerto and especially in the *cadenza* to the closing movement, Vähälä nimbly played passages of virtuosity requiring double and triple stops as the Symphony maintained a stately yet joyous feel to the music.

Sir Edward Elgar’s 1899 *Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 36*, more commonly known as the *Enigma Variations*, also drew from a historical form. Begun as the composer’s improvisatory noodling at the piano, this work became a set of 14 variations inspired by people, both real and fictional, in Elgar’s life. The most well-known of these is “Variation IX,” named after the Biblical hunter Nimrod and most recently played numerous times throughout the world in memory of Queen Elizabeth II.

The opening theme of Elgar’s *Variations* was both Romantic and delicate, and each subsequent variation showcased different instruments or combinations. Full brass and timpani were featured in “Variation IV”), and a well-unified viola section took center stage with long melodic passages in “Variation VI.” A number of players provided elegant solos, including clarinetist Pascal Archer, flutist Anthony Trionfo, oboist Lillian Copeland, and cellist Madeline Fayette. Milanov and the Symphony built the orchestral sound well in the “Nimrod” variation, showing a noble and lush ensemble palette. Violins executed quick passages in a playful tenth variation, with lower strings leading the way through the penultimate variation. Milanov led the Symphony to conclude the work triumphantly in the final variation, named after the composer himself, leaving an appreciative audience to further ponder the “Enigma” of Elgar’s work.

*Princeton Symphony Orchestra will present its next series of concerts on Saturday, December 17, when the ensemble will perform two Holiday POPS concerts with vocalist Janet Dacal. The concerts will be held at Richardson Auditorium at 3 and 6 p.m. and will also include the Princeton High School Choir. Ticket information can be obtained by visiting [princetonsymphony.org](http://princetonsymphony.org).*