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Princeton Symphony Orchestra Returns to McCarter Theatre for Live Performance

By Nancy Plum

Princeton Symphony Orchestra (PSO) presented the second of its live fall 2021 concerts this past Thursday night. Under the direction of Music Director Rossen Milanov, the Symphony performed a program centered on two Viennese masters at McCarter Theatre Center's Matthews Theatre. Joined by guest piano soloist Shai Wosner, the ensemble performed music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Franz Schubert, as well as a 21st-century piece by American composer Evan Williams.

PSO opened Thursday night's concert with Williams' one-movement *The Dream Deferred* for string orchestra and harp. Williams' 2017 piece draws attention to the school-to-prison pipeline of individuals whose dreams are deferred by a derailed education and subsequent prison experience. With melodies written by New York area youth incorporated into the music, *The Dream Deferred* was inspired by the poetry of American author Langston Hughes.

The symphony began the work with a dark unison from the strings and sharp accented jabs against a dissonant palette. Principal violist Stephanie Griffin played agitated viola passages depicting conflict and harpist André Tarantiles added to the intensity with precision and a percussive effect. The overall musical impression was one of tragic lost lives, contrasted by a melodic duet between the two violin sections. Conductor Milanov led the orchestra well through this accessible piece, effectively conveying the musical question of a provocative social issue in today's world.

Israel-born pianist Shai Wosner has been known for pairing classical masterpieces with contemporary works, so it was no surprise to hear Williams' piece followed by a standard from Mozart's piano concerto repertory. Mozart composed his 1784 Piano Concerto No. 15 in B-flat Major in a *concertante* style, with

wind solos complementing the solo keyboard playing. The wind sections of PSO spoke well in the McCarter acoustic, with principal oboist Roni Gal-Ed elegantly carrying a great deal of the secondary melodic material of the first movement. Vosner displayed a light touch on the piano from the outset, with crisp unisons in tandem with the orchestra. Vosner kept the ornamental figures clean (especially an extended trill and playful cadenza) and played in a detached style to match the resonance of the hall.

Milanov led the second movement “Andante” in a courtly and refined style, as Vosner provided a flowing piano part with even *arpeggios*. Mozart considered this Concerto to be one of his more difficult, and the solo keyboard part of the third movement was certainly a reason why. Vosner maneuvered easily through quick scale passages, fast chords up and down the keyboard and tricky hand-crossing demands. He also demonstrated a particularly fast right hand in the first “episode” of this final “Allegro,” maintaining lightness and clarity. Milanov and the Princeton Symphony brought the Concerto to a graceful close, aided by clean playing from the horns and elegant wind solos from oboist Gal-Ed and flutist Yevgeny Faniuk.

Franz Schubert’s orchestral symphonies are full of the same refined melodies found in his vocal works and owe debts to the Viennese composers who came before. Schubert’s Symphony No. 4 in C Minor (which Schubert himself nicknamed “Tragic”) drew inspiration from both Beethoven and Mozart. Under Milanov’s direction, Princeton Symphony Orchestra began the four-movement symphony with the same dramatic mood found in Mozart’s G minor works. Although clearly somber, Milanov kept the sound well-contained without rushing. Melodic sequences were well delineated, and effectively executed shifts in tempo, as well as a well-handled closing coda to the first movement, were reminiscent of Beethoven.

Schubert’s well-deserved reputation as a melodist was evident in the second movement “Andante,” with oboist Gal-Ed adding expressive passages to the orchestral color. Gal-Ed and flutist Faniuk were frequently paired with the strings, backed by delicate wind writing. Princeton Symphony Orchestra, aided by a trio of solo winds in Gal-Ed, Faniuk, and clarinetist Andy Cho, closed the Symphony musically traveling through the dark nature and agitation of the final movement to a triumphant close.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra will present its next Classical Series concert on Saturday, February 5 at 8 p.m. and Sunday, February 6, 2022 at 4 p.m. at Richardson Auditorium. Featured on this concert will be violinist Diana Adamyan in her United States debut performing music of Sibelius. Also on the program will be music of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and Antonín Dvorák. Ticket information can be obtained by visiting princetonsymphony.org.