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## Princeton Symphony Orchestra Launches a Musical Restart in Richardson Auditorium

*By Nancy Plum*

Princeton Symphony Orchestra (PSO) began 2022 with a lush “new beginning,” performing music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to open the New Year in an opulent orchestral way. Led by guest conductor Kenneth Bean and featuring guest solo violinist Alexi Kenney, the PSO presented three works which captured the musical atmosphere of the lives and times of each of the composers.

Currently assistant conductor of the PSO, Kenneth Bean has an extensive career leading both adult and youth orchestral ensembles. Bean’s conducting strength throughout the concert was clearly finding dynamic variety, drama, and theatricality in the three pieces performed. The works presented of Coleridge-Taylor, Sibelius, and Dvorak provided ample opportunity for an imaginative approach to orchestral color, and Bean took advantage of every possibility.

Beginning with Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s 1898 *Ballade in A minor*, PSO demonstrated an ability to play from refined to lush and with dynamics ranging from rich and powerful to almost imperceptible. London-born Coleridge-Taylor became well-known as a composer from at an early age, drawing the attention of 19th-century compositional powerhouse Sir Edward Elgar. Coleridge-Taylor’s *Ballade* was premiered through a commission by Elgar, immediately showing the work to be cinematic and attention-getting. Bean and the PSO began the piece in dramatic fashion, with very steady horns coupled with a lean unison string color. Bean allowed the orchestral sound to develop gradually, and the ensemble shifted musical moods well. Equal parts fanfare and simplicity, this one-movement multi-section work was played with characteristic lushness. A duet between clarinetist Andy Cho and bassoonist Brad Balliett showed elegance and precision, with flutist

Julietta Curenton and Mary Schmidt adding a fluttering musical icing on the orchestral texture.

Finnish composer Jean Sibelius' 1904 Violin Concerto in D minor fit right into the opulent late 19th-century concerto tradition, but rather than being an equal partnership between orchestra and soloist, this work was clearly for the soloist. Guest violinist Alexi Kenney was well up to the challenge, leaning into melodic lines and demonstrating physical playing. Throughout his career, Kenney has been active as both soloist and commissioner of new works; his most recent recording is accompanied by a "visual album" pairing music with contemporary sculpture.

Kenney began the opening movement of the concerto emerging gracefully out of a delicate instrumental palette. With a subdued orchestral accompaniment, the overall musical effect was icy, contrasted by the lush solo melody of the first movement. The soloist's music was improvisatory throughout, as Kenney showed a wide range of playing styles, from a rich lower register to making the audience sit up and listen by bringing the dynamics down to almost nothing. The first movement cadenza was full of complex double stops, with Kenney seemingly playing a duet with himself and the solo line punctuated by the orchestra. Conducting with broad strokes, Bean brought the movement to a triumphant finish, with Kenney providing a closing soloistic flourish.

Clarinetists Cho and Sherry Hartman-Apgar opened the second movement "Adagio" elegantly, as Bean kept the lid on the sound, allowing it to grow organically. Kenney's hymn-like solo line was well accompanied by a quintet of horns and unison playing in the lower register of the strings. The closing "Allegro" movement (which a contemporary of Sibelius referred to as a "polonaise for polar bears") shifted in style between a rollicking rhythmic ostinato and martial character. Throughout the movement, Bean maintained excellent control over dynamic ebbs and flows as Kenney showed the full range of the violin.

With all the stops and starts in performance over the past two years, members of Princeton Symphony Orchestra may feel they have entered a new world. Nineteenth-century Czech composer Antonín Dvorak arrived in his own "new world" when he came to the United States in 1891 to assume the directorship of New York's National Conservatory of Music, a move which precipitated some of his most well-known works. Dvorak's Symphony No. 9 in E minor (*From the New World*), composed in 1893, well incorporated the syncopated rhythms and languorous melodies of the composer's newly adopted homeland.

Composed in four movements, this symphony has been particularly known for its infusion of Native American and African American musical melodies, especially in the second movement "Largo." A rich harmonic opening from the lower strings of Princeton Symphony showed the ensemble's comfort with the work from the

outset. Pairs of instruments sounded as one, as thematic material was passed around the ensemble. Bean led the first movement in a lively tempo, with the musicians still able to capture Dvorak's intended spacious and open atmosphere.

The second movement, with its "Goin' Home" folk melody theme belonged to English horn player Rachel Ahn. Following a reverent opening, Ahn played the nostalgic and reflective melody with simplicity and elegance, deftly fitting into the orchestral texture. Conductor Bean continued expanding the dynamics in this movement, which included several particularly sensitive moments, especially passages played by a solo octet of strings and a duet between concertmaster Ruotau Mao and cellist Alistair MacRae.

Graceful wind solos abounded in the closing two movements of the symphony, with flutist Curenton and oboist Cheng paired in the third movement, often answered by clarinetists Cho and Hartman-Apgar. The intervals of thirds played an important role in the orchestral color, and the winds of the PSO were always harmonically clean and precise. The PSO also demonstrated great variety in the brass shadings, as Bean and the players brought the symphony to a tapered yet hopeful close.

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