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Princeton Symphony Orchestra Closes Season with Fiery Young Violinist

By Nancy Plum

Princeton Symphony Orchestra closed the 2021-22 season this past weekend with a classical violinist who is making his mark worldwide. Led by PSO Music Director Rossen Milanov, the Orchestra and guest violinist Stefan Jackiw performed a lesser-known and somewhat underrated 20th-century concerto, bracketed by a very contemporary work and a symphonic classic.

American violinist Jackiw began playing violin at age 4, eventually earning concurrent degrees from Harvard University and New England Conservatory of Music. In Saturday night's performance (the concert was repeated Sunday afternoon), Jackiw showed himself from the opening measures of Erich Wolfgang Korngold's Violin Concerto in D Major to be a very physical player, leaning into solo lines with a youthful and fresh sound. Korngold's *Concerto* (nicknamed the *Hollywood Concerto* when it first premiered) was definitely cinematic, full of lush music designed to pull at listeners' emotions. Korngold's colorful orchestration provided numerous solo opportunities for the wind and brass players, including oboist Lillian Copeland and hornist Gabrielle Pho.

The solo violin part in Korngold's Concerto was continuous, and Jackiw showed impassioned violin playing throughout the piece. In the second movement "romance," he was joined in an elegant duet by English horn player Gilles Cheng, with the solo line well complemented by flutists Armir Farsi and Mary Schmidt. Jackiw's solo line immediately took off in the third movement "finale," for which Korngold borrowed heavily from his own film scores. The principal theme of this song-like movement sounded as though it should be familiar, but as it was passed around among the players, the tune was jazzed up and altered (especially by the brass), leading to a spirited conclusion to the Concerto.

Milanov surrounded Korngold's Concerto with a one-movement work of Gabriela Lena Frank rooted in the music of Peru and a familiar symphony by Felix Mendelssohn. Frank's *Elegia Andina* employed elements of Peruvian percussion to musically depict Frank's exploration of her ethnic background. This work included a complex percussion section, with Sae Hashimoto and Stella Perlic providing unusual musical effects from a glockenspiel and temple blocks. Expressive playing was heard from flutists Farsi and Schmidt, as well as clarinetist Andy Cho. The piece took a dark turn with a rich sectional cello sound, as Milanov led the Orchestra well to a quiet and peaceful ending of the imaginative piece.

Although not as well-known as his more popular "Italian" Symphony, Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 3 in A Minor (nicknamed the "Scottish" Symphony) is equally as full of Mendelssohn's rich melodic writing, and was a fitting close to this early spring concert. Milanov led the Princeton Symphony Orchestra players through a stately introduction to the first movement, with dark orchestral colors recalling the Scottish moors and countryside which had inspired Mendelssohn. Rather than incorporate regional folk songs and melodic material into this work, Mendelssohn sought to capture Scotland's atmosphere and history. A brooding but hopeful melody marked the first movement, with intensity achieved through density of orchestration.

Andy Cho's clarinet solo in the second movement was almost a hornpipe, with the rest of the ensemble keeping the music moving through Mendelssohn's rhythmic "Scotch snap." The third movement "adagio" was played elegantly by the Orchestra, with a clean melody from the first violins against *pizzicato* playing from the rest of the strings. The violins demonstrated particularly intense playing in the closing movement against clean oboes and clarinets, with the music well punctuated by the brass sections. Flutist Farsi, oboist Copeland, clarinetist Cho, and bassoonist Brad Balliett all provided stylistic solos, with Milanov and the full ensemble bringing the symphony to a melodic and joyous close.

Over the past two difficult concert years, Princeton Symphony Orchestra has gone through heroic efforts to provide whatever form of orchestral performance was possible at the time and keep its audience engaged. This closing concert of the season was a prime example of the Orchestra maintaining its commitment to contemporary music, the classics, and showcasing trailblazing instrumental talent.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra has announced a full schedule of performances for the 2022-23 season. Information about PSO's activities for next year can be found at princetonsymphony.org.

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