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Princeton Symphony Orchestra Presents Dynamic Solo Cellist in Romantic Cello Concerto

By Nancy Plum

Princeton Symphony Orchestra coupled a contemporary symphonic work with a beloved 19th-century Czech composer this past weekend with a pair of performances in Richardson Auditorium on the campus of Princeton University. Led by PSO Music Director Rossen Milanov, the ensemble presented a piece recently premiered, as well as works by Antonín Dvorak and Igor Stravinsky, both of whom made their homes in the United States at some point. Joining the Orchestra in these “Edward T. Cone” performances was magnetic Spanish cellist Pablo Ferrández.

Saturday night’s concert (the performance was repeated Sunday afternoon) opened with the one-movement *Amer’ican* of Michigan-born composer James Lee III. Composed in 2019, *Amer’ican* was inspired by Dvorak’s *New World Symphony*, along with 18th-century artwork of Indigenous Americans. Lee’s piece began serenely, with Scott Kemsley’s solo flute introducing an orchestral palette in which the instruments seemed to be on their own. The winds, especially a pair of clarinets, were effective in executing swirling passages, with a varied percussion section providing musical effects evoking Americana. Flutists Kemsley and Mary Schmidt carried much of the melodic material in the work, with elegant solos provided by other winds and brass, including oboist Gilles Cheng and trombone player Carlos Jiménez Fernández. Lee was inspired by Dvorak when writing this piece, and shades of the Czech composer could be heard in the solo clarinet lines, gracefully played by Andy Cho. Conductor Milanov well-handled the work’s transitions between lyricism and driving rhythms.

Prize-winning cellist Pablo Ferrández has been acclaimed as being a captivating performer, complete with technique, spirit and expressivity. Ferrández was featured in Dvorak’s 1895 Cello Concerto in B Minor, written while the composer was living in the

United States, and subsequently revised in response to the death of a family member.

The first movement of the concerto began with an orchestral introduction so long it seemed like a symphonic work in itself. These passages were particularly marked by rich horn playing from Jonathan Clark. When solo cellist Ferrández emerged from the musical texture, the technical demands of the solo line were immediately evident. Ferrández played with a great deal of fast vibrato, and his lyrical tone and quick fingering propelled the piece forward. Ferrández's solo line was often answered in refinement by Cheng's oboe line.

Second movements of Dvorak symphonic works are renowned for melodies deeply personal to the composer, and this concerto was no exception. Hymnlike winds opened the Adagio, as clarinetists Cho and Sherry Hartman-Apgar played sweet intervallic thirds. The solo playing of Ferrández effectively led the Orchestra back to Dvorak's darker melodic passages, with long lines in the cello melody crisply answered by flutist Kemsley. Milanov maneuvered the Orchestra well into the chipper closing sections of the concerto, as Ferrández demonstrated solid communication with the ensemble players, especially in duet passages with concertmaster Elizabeth Fayette.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra acknowledged current world events with an expansive and Romantic rendition of the Ukrainian national anthem *Shche ne vmerla Ukrainy*, and closed the concert with Igor Stravinsky's 1919 suite from *The Firebird*. One of Stravinsky's collaborations with Russian ballet impresario Serge Diaghilev for the Ballets Russes in Paris, *The Firebird* score was inspired by Russian folklore and primeval Russian history.

Beginning with celli and double basses, with the melodic material slowly climbing through the Orchestra, the "Introduction" of the *Firebird Suite* evoked waking up in a forest. Quirky winds abounded, as one might expect from a work of Stravinsky, with especially gentle solos heard from oboist Cheng and clarinetist Cho in the "Ronde des princesses." Clean brass marked the familiar "Danse infernale du roi Kastcheï;" the final movement featured hornist Clark gracefully accompanied by harpist André Tarantiles, as Princeton Symphony Orchestra closed the concert in polished style.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra will present its next Classical Series concert on Saturday, March 26 at 8 p.m. and Sunday, March 27 at 4 p.m. in Richardson Auditorium. Conducted by Rossen Milanov, this concert will feature guest pianist Mackenzie Melemed and music of Alexander Scriabin and Johannes Brahms. Ticket information can be obtained by visiting the Princeton Symphony Orchestra website at princetonsymphony.org.