

## **CONCERT REVIEW: Reading Symphony Orchestra season ends on a high note**

By Susan L. Peña

Reading Eagle Correspondent

April 13, 2008

**Berks County, PA** - The Reading Symphony Orchestra ended what has been an extraordinary debut season under Music Director Andrew Constantine with still another concert full of brilliant playing Saturday night in the Sovereign Performing Arts Center.

Returning as soloist for the third time with the RSO was violist Roberto Diaz, always popular with this audience. I must say I was delighted that he and Constantine chose to perform Bartok's Viola Concerto, the composer's last work, rather than the previously scheduled "Harold in Italy."

The Bartok concerto — left incomplete when he died of leukemia in 1945 and finished by one of his proteges, Tibor Serly — is an intriguing piece, with a devilish viola part.

Diaz revealed during a preconcert lecture that his father, also a violist, studied with Scottish violist William Primrose, who commissioned the piece and played its premiere. He also happened to be playing Primrose's viola.

He proved once again to be both a fine technician and a passionate interpreter in a piece that requires the utmost in speed, particularly in the finale, which reveals Bartok's love of Hungarian gypsy music.

There were gems all through the three movements: the interplay between viola and woodwinds; the passionate viola solo over French horns in the mysterious, haunting second movement; and the contrasts between stillness and disturbance. It's a wonderful piece, performed impeccably.

The concert opened with Brahms' "Tragic Overture," giving the evening a dramatic start. This most Brahmsian of pieces highlighted the lush RSO strings and the low brass.

Ending as he started the season, with a Russian composer, Constantine chose Shostakovich's Symphony No. 1, written when he was only 19, to truly show what the orchestra could do.

From the beginning, he and the RSO have made a solid team, and this was most evident in their performance of this masterpiece.

Many of the orchestra's principals were featured in solos, notably bassoonist Valerie Trollinger-Flohr; clarinetist Janine Thomas; flutist Mary Berk; oboist Terence Belzer; trumpeter Frank Ferraro Jr.; and pianist Rebecca Gass Butler.

There was never a dull moment throughout the work, which ended with a breathtaking swell of energy and a crash that brought the audience to its feet.

As an encore, the RSO played Shostakovich's charming arrangement of "Tea for Two."

The RSO was joined after intermission by the Reading Symphony Youth Orchestra, led by Peter Brye, performing Williams' "The Cowboys Overture."

The young musicians' enthusiastic, powerful performance earned them their own standing ovation.

## A soothing 'Serenade' of nocturnal sounds

*Tenor, horn player shine in BSO concert*

BY TIM SMITH

Sun Music Critic

Originally published February 3, 2007

Poetry and music are forever addressing issues of life and death. When the two art forms are brought together in that pursuit, the results can be doubly, deeply revealing and affecting. Such is the case with Benjamin Britten's *Serenade* for tenor, horn and strings, an extraordinarily subtle reflection on mortality.

The work's exquisite imagery and arresting sounds enveloped Meyerhoff Symphony Hall on Thursday afternoon. The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's repeat performance this morning should be well worth catching. (You'll get even more out of it if you can bring a copy of the poems that Britten chose for this piece. In a serious omission, no texts were provided for Thursday's tiny, but highly appreciative, audience.)

Composed in 1943 for Britten's life partner, tenor Peter Pears, and legendary British horn player Dennis Brain, the *Serenade* is an extended song of the night. Both the reality and the symbolism of the nocturnal world are evoked - "the fainting sun" (Charles Cotton); the "dying, dying, dying" of "wild echoes flying" (Alfred Tennyson); the "soft embalmer of the still midnight" and "the hushed casket of my soul" (John Keats).

Remarkably, there is nothing morbid here, but, rather, strangely comforting beauty. Thanks to the horn solo that opens and, relocated offstage, closes the piece, there's a gentle beckoning quality, too - haunted calls from another world. In the six songs between those calls, the horn becomes, in effect, a second voice, communicating every bit as eloquently as the refined words intoned by the singer.

Considerable virtuosity is required of both soloists, and that's just what tenor Kenneth Tarver and the BSO's principal horn player, Philip Munds, brought to the stage Thursday in a rewarding chamber orchestra program.

Tarver's limpid timbre and thoughtful phrasing got to the heart of the matter. He made the distinctive contours of Britten's melodic lines speak naturally and truly.

Munds tackled the unusually demanding horn part with keen musicianship. A couple of notes didn't come out cleanly, but a richness of expression carried the soloist through in high style, reaching particular poignancy in the Prologue and Epilogue.

Sensitive conducting by Andrew Constantine and beautifully shaded work by the BSO strings added the finishing touches to a performance that achieved what British poet Geoffrey Grigson described as "the piercing benediction of [Britten's] music."

Constantine, who is in his last season as the BSO's highly valuable associate conductor, was likewise impressive in the remainder of the concert. He drew out not just the exuberance, but the dark lyricism, of David Diamond's *Rounds for Strings*. An imprecise entrance or two aside, the players responded surely and vividly.

Likewise in Tchaikovsky's glorious *Souvenir de Florence*, originally written for sextet and just as effective for full string orchestra. It would be fine by me if the composer's more popular *Serenade for Strings* were banned for a few years, so the eventful, brilliantly tuneful *Souvenir* could gain the familiarity it deserves.

Constantine artfully shaped and propelled the score. The ensemble did some impressive work here, especially in the zesty whirl of the finale. Lovely solos by Jonathan Carney (violin), Ilya Finkelshteyn (cello) and Richard Field (viola) filled in extra details of this dynamic musical postcard.

# Q-C symphony leaves audience hungry for more Gershwin, Dvorak

By L. Edward Sizemore | Monday, November 05, 2007

From the first bars of George Gershwin's 1928 tone-poem, "An American in Paris," guest conductor Andrew Constantine demonstrated a fresh, animated style of conducting which, nevertheless, offered the orchestra tight control and first-rate musical leadership.

The percussion section's light-handed syncopation added to Saturday night's appreciation of the work by the near-capacity audience at the Adler Theatre in Davenport.

The three Gershwin pieces are among his better-known works, along with the Concerto in F and the opera "Porgy and Bess."

Pianist William Wolfram immediately showed that he "got rhythm" in the second offering, the variations on "I Got Rhythm." Indeed, they all had rhythm — orchestra, conductor and pianist.

The first half of the evening's program closed with the ever-popular "Rhapsody in Blue." The iconic wail of the clarinet through its three registers is widely known and was handled nicely.

This work was premiered by Paul Whiteman's band in 1925, with Gershwin at the keyboard. It has been said Gershwin — also classically trained — brought jazz into the concert hall. The continuing popularity of the work suggests that this "experiment in new music" was a great success.

After the intermission, the audience was treated to what is arguably Antonin Dvorak's best-known work, to American audiences at any rate, his Symphony No. 9 in E-minor. Dvorak, like Bedrich Smetana, Leos Janacek and a few others, was a nationalist Czech composer. He studied violin, viola, organ, piano and, of course, composition.

Dvorak's fame as a composer arose almost overnight in 1877, with a letter sent to an important publisher by Johannes Brahms.

By 1884, Dvorak's London concerts were great successes. His fame was such that he was invited to become the artistic director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York, the duties of which he assumed late in September 1892. The expectation was that this great Czech nationalist composer could create an American national style.

After studying African American and Native American music, Dvorak wrote his Symphony No. 9, subtitled "From the New World."

He created some of the composition while spending summers in the Czech community of Spillville, Iowa.

It premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1893. The African American and Native American elements are evident in the work, though not directly quoted.

Saturday's performance under the baton of Constantine was, by turns, bold, elegant, sweeping and restrained. The second movement of the Dvorak symphony, Largo, was exceptionally well-handled, delicate and reverential. By contrast, the finale, Allegro con Fuoco, was quite grand — not boisterous, just grand.

Both the guest conductor and guest pianist received standing ovations. As all great artists do, they left the audience wanting more.

## **BSO hits a high note with tribute to King**

### *Soulful Symphony captures flavors of life*

BY TIM SMITH

Sun Music Critic

Originally published January 18, 2007

Members of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and the Soulful Symphony sat side by side Tuesday night in a vibrant concert commemorating the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The resulting mix of black and white musicians carried over into a program of works by black and white composers. This 21st annual King tribute, a co-presentation of the BSO and the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture, drew a large crowd to Meyerhoff Symphony Hall.

After a round of speeches, including one by Baltimore mayor designate Sheila Dixon, the focus was all musical.

Of particular note was the world premiere of Southern Folk Sketches by Darin Atwater, the BSO's composer in residence and the Soulful Symphony's founding artistic director.

It's a charmer, in the tradition of descriptive suites by Edward MacDowell, who, a century ago, likewise sought to capture assorted flavors of American life in music.

Atwater's neo-romantic score was inspired by memories of summer visits to his grandmother in North Carolina. Her up-at-5 morning habit, for example, is captured in a movement that uses a 5/4 rhythm and evokes both a sense of daily routine and a touch of anticipation.

"Wednesday Night Devotions," recalling Bible studies Atwater attended, is imbued with something of the nostalgia and lyricism in Samuel Barber's music. "Lightning Bugs in a Jar" gets amusing mileage from buzzing noises made with mouthpieces of brass instruments (I was reminded more of mosquitos).

"Southern Dusk," the last of the six short sketches, is a tender, beautifully written bit of atmosphere that again achieves a Barber-like mood, especially in the hushed final bars.

Not everything clicks. "Halftime Show," punctuated with slow, heavy percussion, goes on a little too long and doesn't quite conjure up the composer's intended image of an intense high school football scene. And "Salon Songs" just misses melodic distinctiveness.

But, except for overly generous application of wind chimes, the lush orchestration is admirable throughout the roughly 15-minute score. If there is a movie-music aspect to the work, it's quality movie music.

BSO associate conductor Andrew Constantine led Southern Folks Sketches with considerable sensitivity and drew a vivid performance from the ensemble.

The program began with the Lyric for Strings by George Walker, whose work should turn up in concert much more often.

What a remarkable piece this is, so brief, yet so full of arresting ideas. Constantine made the most of it, coaxing a particularly eloquent response from the players at the end in a long diminuendo.

It wasn't a great programming idea to follow the slow Lyric with Max Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1, which begins with two slow movements.

But the selection certainly provided a welcome introduction to 22-year-old violinist Melissa White, a student at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute and a winner of the 2001 Sphinx Competition for young black and Hispanic musicians.

With her well-centered pitch and penetrating tone, White proved most impressive caressing the concerto's lyrical lines. In the dancing finale, taken rather sluggishly, the violinist encountered a few cloudy spots of articulation, but the expressiveness of her playing never faded. Constantine kept the orchestral side of things flowing smoothly.

George Gershwin's overworked Rhapsody in Blue was freshened up by pianist Stewart Goodyear, effectively partnered by Constantine and a lively orchestra.

The under-30, Canadian-born Goodyear dropped a few notes, but his kinetic, imaginative approach lit up the place. At one point, he even managed to offer an amusing, imitative response at the keyboard to an inopportune cell phone - not that there's any other kind during a concert.

## **BSO's 'Best of Baroque'**

by Gail Wein

Washington Post

July 10, 2006

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Chestnuts from the 17th century reworked for modern orchestra gave baroque music a romantic spin Thursday at Strathmore.

Ironically, the lightest piece on the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's "Best of Baroque" program was the one most solidly set in the romantic era. Brahms's Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, orchestrated by Edmund Rubbra, showcased every section of the orchestra with bright harmonies and keen staccatos.

Through Hamilton Harty's lush reorchestration, Handel's Overture to "Music for the Royal Fireworks" was transformed into a late-romantic gem. The sharp corners of the baroque style were smoothed over by BSO Associate Conductor Andrew Constantine's relaxed tempos in a glorious mass of sound.

Highlighting an oft-maligned instrument, Telemann's Concerto for Two Violas featured outstanding soloists: the BSO's own Peter Minkler and Christian Colberg. Perfectly balanced with the orchestra, they played together with a rare sensitivity.

Edward Elgar infused Bach's Fantasia and Fugue in C Minor with his signature colorful orchestration. The work was undeniably Elgar's as it approached its climax, with a battery of percussionists, punching brass, harp glissandos and an enormous crescendo into the finale. Leopold Stokowski's orchestral arrangement of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, layered the orchestra section by section: cellos, trombones, clarinets, violins and flutes all imitated a great organ, which is the instrument designed to emulate an orchestra. Bach's mastery of counterpoint and Stokowski's command of orchestration added up to a memorable conclusion to the concert.

## **Bach and Handel on steroids**

*BSO opens MusicFest with supersized baroque gems*

By Tim Smith

Sun Music Critic

Originally published July 10, 2006

After a bumpy - make that rainy and muddy - start to its outdoor concert season at Oregon Ridge early last week, the [Baltimore Symphony Orchestra](#) opened its indoor Summer MusicFest in the safety of Meyerhoff Symphony Hall Friday night.

The program, also presented the night before at the Music Center at Strathmore in North Bethesda, was billed as "The Best of Baroque." It was nothing of the kind. Not an unadulterated note of Bach or Handel or Vivaldi to be found. Better to have called it "The Best of Big Band Baroque," since most of the concert held full-orchestra, larger-than-life transcriptions of music originally written for smaller forces. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

To tell the truth, I've always gotten a kick out of supersized, romanticized, now politically incorrect arrangements of baroque repertoire. And in the case of Handel's Music for the Royal Fireworks, which began life as an overstuffed showcase for wind instruments (two dozen oboes among them), it's not much of an aural stretch to hear it played symphonically.

Hamilton Harty's 1930s orchestration of that Handel favorite doesn't just enrich the sound, but also thickens the flavor. This is Handel reincarnated as Brahms, and the BSO's amiable associate conductor Andrew Constantine had the orchestra luxuriating in that lush texture as he got the program rolling with the Fireworks Overture.

Later on, he offered a more direct Handel-Brahms connection - Brahms' Variations on a Theme of Handel, originally a piano piece, presented in the orchestration by British composer Edmund Rubbra. Here we had just a smidgen of actual baroque, in the form of the 1733 Handel tune that Brahms used as a starting point. The rest was pure fancy - Brahms' brilliant variations from 1861, Rubbra's imaginative reworking of them in 1938.

Constantine made a persuasive case for the infrequently encountered Rubbra-ized score, which abounds in deftly crafted instrumental coloring. Variations 27 and 28 could have been penned by Tchaikovsky, 9 and 19 by Elgar. The BSO responded with alert, dynamic playing.

Speaking of Elgar, he was represented by his arrangement of Bach's Fantasia and Fugue in C minor. There is so much of Elgar in the piece, temperamentally as well as musically, that some of it (almost all of the Fantasia) sounds exceedingly far from the baroque world, but still somehow well-connected in spirit and truth - like a lovingly hand-tinted colorization of an old black and white photograph.

By contrast, Leopold Stokowski's Bach transcriptions from the 1920s and '30s are closer to computer-generated graphics, deliciously vivid and deliberately grand in their virtuosic demands on an orchestra.

Constantine was a little too reserved in his approach to the Bach-Elgar item, especially the Fugue portion; a stronger shot of emotion would have helped. But he was wonderfully unrestrained in the Bach-Stokowski Toccata and Fugue in D minor and had the BSO tearing mightily into the music. Great stuff.

Another Bach-Stokowski gem, Sheep May Safely Graze, received a warmly phrased performance, aided by elegant woodwind playing.

Two selections gave the concert a taste of more authentic baroque and baroque proportions - Pachelbel's well-worn Canon in D for strings, which flowed by pleasantly, and Telemann's Concerto for Two Violas.

The Telemann work does not give the soloists a lot to do; this isn't a bravura-minded concerto. But the BSO's Peter Minkler and Christian Colberg made the most of it, producing a mellow tone, blending seamlessly and articulating with admirable clarity, as Constantine ensured smooth support from the ensemble.

## **Symphony appeals to senses**

*Program will incorporate interactive, computer-generated images on screens around the orchestra, in addition to music*

By Tim Smith

Sun Music critic

Originally published March 30, 2006

A motorcycle gang terrorizing a concert hall. A regal swan floating on a river that surrounds the Land of Death. A glittery bird with magical feathers helping a prince defeat an evil villain whose soul is buried in an egg.

You can meet those rough bikers and exotic fowl in the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's latest Symphony with a Twist program, "What Dreams Are Made Of."

"You know how someone will tell you not to over-tighten a screw that you're twisting," says BSO associate conductor Andrew Constantine. "Well, we may be on the verge of over-tightening the twist with this concert."

The Twist series typically offers audiences something different to hear and, as in this case, something different to see.

The biggest item on the bill is *The Firebird*, Igor Stravinsky's prismatic ballet score from 1910, based on Russian folk legends - this is where the magic feather and the prince come in.

The music is most often encountered in an abbreviated suite the composer fashioned, but Constantine has programmed all 45 minutes or so of the original ballet. "I'm very excited about conducting it," he says. "The suite really is a pale reflection of the complete score."

Getting all of *The Firebird* into the concert is not the twist, though.

"It will be accompanied by live, interactive, computer-generated images on three huge screens suspended around the orchestra," Constantine says. "The semi-abstract images happen in real time. If it all works, it's going to be very cool."

The British-born conductor commissioned the visual component through a grant he received from the U.K.'s National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts. He engaged a British team, director Cathie Boyd and designer Martin Parker, to produce the project and handle the technical duties during performances.

The result will be "almost like choreography, but without the dancers," Constantine says. "Everyone is looking at different ways of presenting concerts these days. You have to be innovative. This is one attempt at doing that. It offers an alternative listening perspective."

*The Swan of Tuonela* by Jean Sibelius, inspired by an episode in an old Finnish epic (*Tuonela* is the Kingdom of Death, ringed by a Hades-like river), was fashioned in 1896 as a tone poem - a descriptive orchestral piece - not a ballet. But, in another twist, it will have movement here, danced by Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell.

"It's one of the most evocative and thought-provoking pieces Sibelius wrote," Constantine says.

With two avian doses of fantasy and myth on the program, how on earth does a piece by Michael Daugherty called *Hell's Angels* fit in?

"Where Sibelius and Stravinsky used folk legends about good and evil, Daugherty found a tongue-in-cheek inspiration for mythology," Constantine says. "He takes a contemporary theme about almost legendary types. People are undecided whether they're good or evil, or both."

Daugherty's 1999 score takes off on the image of a biker's un-muffled exhaust pipes, which suggested to the composer pipe-shaped instruments. They become the protagonists in what he describes as "the musical tale of a gang of hot-rodding, motorcycling bassoonists who ride into town and take over a concert hall."

The idea of putting three bassoons and a contrabassoon way out front in an orchestral work - bassoonists typically keep a much lower profile - is quite a twist in itself.

"The piece has very jazzy moments and very reflective moments," Constantine says. "The rest of it is relentlessly energetic. It's rollicking good fun."

**Wednesday, March 29, 2006**

## **Hell's Bells, Martini Bars: BSO's Symphony With A Twist**

By Chris Slattery  
Staff Writer  
Gazette.net

Pssst! Wanna go to a classical music performance?

I didn't think so.

It's not that you don't like classical music. Maybe you listen to it at home sometimes, when you're in the right frame of mind, or you enjoy it when you're working out, dining out or what have you. Heck, you loved "Fantasia" as a kid.

But to actually go sit around for a few hours while a symphony plays stuff, well, it sounds a little intimidating, doesn't it? Not to mention boring. And Baltimore Symphony Orchestra conductor Andrew Constantine knows exactly how you feel.

"The culture of classical music, for so long, has been a private world in many people's eyes," he says. "We can't afford to be that way anymore."

So on Friday evening, he'll encourage each of the four BSO bassoonists to get in touch with their inner Hell's Angel right there on the stage of the Music Center at Strathmore. And if you don't know what a bassoon looks like, much less sounds like, well, just look for the classical musicians wearing leather motorcycle gear.

"It's really disturbing what they've managed to bring out of their wardrobes," says Constantine, 44, in mock horror.

Welcome to the BSO's "Symphony with a Twist." It's where the classical crowd lets its hair down, where the BSO is hoping to attract a more eclectic fan base, and where tapas and flavored martinis are available before the show.

"This was really done with an idea to change the nature of the concert experience and bring in a new audience," says Michael Mael, the BSO's Vice President at Strathmore. "It's still classical music, but there's a twist. It's a lighter, more social scene prior to the concert. You feel like you're 'going out.'"

And inside the concert hall, which gets a makeover on Twist nights so it looks a bit like a jazz club, the twist continues. So far, there have been six Twist concerts; there might be a theme (last year, the "Havana Nights" twist was a hit), or a special performer (the twist that featured Bobby McFerrin was like a twist-within-a-twist).

For the program called "What dreams are made of," the BSO is the place for mythological creatures. This weekend, it's all about Hell's Angels; well, it's as much all about Hell's Angels as it is possible for a classical concert to be.

Hog wild

"The bassoon doesn't get to stand out in front of the orchestra much," says Phillip Kolker, 64. "So this is really unique – a special one for the four of us."

Kolker has been the principal bassoon of the BSO since 1972. And although he figures he has ridden a motorcycle, uh, once, he is happy to explain why four bassoonists are going hog wild in public on Friday.

“After all, the bassoon is similar in size and shape to the drag pipes on a Harley Davidson motorcycle,” he explains. (And no, I am not making up a word of this.) Anyway, that was how composer Michael Daugherty saw it, and he created a bassoon-heavy piece and called it “Hell’s Angels.” (Kind of goes along with his 1993 work “Dead Elvis,” written for a small chamber ensemble — and I’m not making that up either.)

“It goes back and forth,” says Kolker. “Wild stuff, beautiful, eerie, high note stuff. It has some ethereal sounds, beautiful long-line things, theatrical percussion, and it calls for ‘thunder sheets with chains.’”

Yeah! How do you like your symphony now?

Here’s the thing: As much as Twist programming is a tool to reach and educate the new audiences any symphony needs, it’s kind of cool to see how tongue in cheek a world-class orchestra like the BSO is willing to be.

Ask Constantine, who is from the decidedly not-snobby northeast of England, how he first entered the world of classical music, and he says he started as a child at school.

“They said ‘Big hands, learn the cello,’” he recalls. “And then I went home, and my mum said, ‘What’s a cello?’”

Swan, swan firebird

When Constantine was awarded Britain’s prestigious National Endowment for Science, Technology and Arts (NESTA) Fellowship in 2003, he used the stipend that came along with it to commission a performance piece. Friday’s program ends with a cross-disciplinary performance of Stravinsky’s “The Firebird” that the conductor collaborated on with Irish theater director Cathie Boyd and designer Martin Parker.

No actual Pontiac Firebirds will be featured onstage, but there will be a visual presentation based on software that links to a live acoustic feed in the orchestra. Each instrument has its own predetermined graphics, and the audience can “see” the music in real time.

“What we’ve done is added this visual dimension,” says Constantine. “Huge screens are hung behind the orchestra.”

And he points out that it will be the 1910 version of “The Firebird,” not the 1919 version with which most people are familiar. (In case you need something to say, loudly, to your date as you file out for intermission.)

OK, Hell’s Angels, computer graphics — what’s so unusual about “Swan of Tuonela,” the Sibelius piece that kicks off the program?

“The Swan of Tuonela is a lost soul in many ways,” says Constantine. “It’s not something you’d expect to see choreographed, but we have a dancer performing on stage.”

That’s Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell, a former Alvin Ailey Dance company member portraying the swan because, remember, this is about mythological creatures. Human swans, firebirds, Hell’s Angels — and yes, young, hip, raised-on-MTV classical music aficionados.

The BSO at Strathmore’s “Symphony With A Twist, What Dreams Are Made Of” will begin at 8 p.m. Friday in the Music Center, 5301 Tuckerman Lane, North Bethesda. Tickets range from \$21 to \$78. Call 301-581-5100.

## **An expressive debut with BSO**

*Sergey Khachatryan's sound is warmer than his demeanor*

By Tim Smith

Sun Music Critic

Originally published March 4, 2006

With the oh-so-cool saunter and almost sulky visage of a brat-packer entering a terminally hip nightspot, Sergey Khachatryan appeared on the stage of the Music Center at Strathmore Thursday night to make his Baltimore Symphony Orchestra debut.

The Armenian-born violinist, barely into his 20s, looked so detached that the unsuspecting listener might have anticipated expressionless music-making, but his playing of the Sibelius Violin Concerto couldn't have been much more involved or involving.

Khachatryan, who took top prize at an international competition named for Sibelius, seemed to find in the Finnish composer's style a sympathetic vibe. Those who prefer to hear this concerto in the bolder, pedal-to-the-metal, Heifetz fashion might have been unimpressed, but Khachatryan's more spacious, internalized approach proved compelling.

There was something about the purity, tenderness and coloristic variety of his tone, the way he sculpted each phrase that decisively separated his performance from the virtuoso-of-the-month variety. If he continues to explore music in such a personal, probing fashion, Khachatryan has every chance to dominate the field in due time. (I don't think it would hurt if he dropped the early-Brando attitude.)

The misty side of the first movement and the melancholy one of the second were expressed with particular eloquence. More thrust would have been welcome in places (the last measures of the finale went oddly limp), but there was never any letup in the smoldering lyricism. That quality, not to mention the pristine technique, made Khachatryan's every note worth hearing.

The soloist was deftly backed by the BSO and the orchestra's associate conductor, Andrew Constantine, substituting for music director Yuri Temirkanov.

Constantine was effectively making a debut, too. Although he has led many an educational and family concert, as well as a few higher-profile events, this was his first appearance on a main classical subscription series program.

He had the evening's curtain-raiser, the under-two-minute Intrada by Adolphus Hailstork, churning nicely and, in the second half, revealed a flair for the melodic language and sonic shadings of Prokofiev.

The Ugly Duckling for voice and orchestra is one of Prokofiev's lesser known works. It's a far cry from the directness of his Peter and the Wolf, a little too sophisticated in its style and construction for children, and maybe a little too diffuse for some adults. The interest comes largely from the instrumental coloring, especially during the passage where the unfortunate duckling wanders alone through a cold winter.

Barbara Rearick's warm mezzo-soprano, admirable diction and animated phrasing got about as much from the piece as possible. The BSO made a sturdy showing here, but grew even more confident and vibrant when it entered more familiar territory, the Suite from Cinderella.

Although not as prized as Prokofiev's other ballet masterpiece, Romeo and Juliet, the score of Cinderella overflows with vivid touches and, especially in the big waltz scene, gripping tunefulness. Constantine had the music flowing effectively and coaxed from the ensemble some sparkling efforts.

## Is Khachatryan a Great Violinist? -- In Principle, Yes.\*

Contributed by jfl on Friday, March 03, 2006



J. Sibelius, S.Khatchaturian *Violin Concertos*, ,  
Khachatryan/Krivine/Sinfonia Varsovia

The Armenian Sergey Khachatryan, the current Queen Elizabeth competition winner (and consequently playing the *Huggins* Stradivarius previously played by Baiba Skride and Nikolaj Znaider) can be seen and heard several times in the Washington/Baltimore region this month: First with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (with which he played in this performance, Thursday night at Strathmore) today, Friday, and tomorrow, Saturday at 8PM and on Sunday at 3PM at the Meyerhoff Hall and then again on March 27th at the Kennedy Center as part of the London Philharmonic's North American tour with Kurt Masur where he will share soloist duties with Arabella Steinbacher, a less famous but hardly lesser violinist. (Interestingly, both have recorded the Khatchaturian concerto on their first major CD release and both will record the Shostakovich concertos within the next year, allowing for direct comparison.)

Yuri Temirkanov was not able to conduct (and won't be, for a while), because a friend's recent passing keeps him in St. Petersburg (back problems were the reason he extended his vacation the last time...), and so associate conductor Andrew Constantine stepped in. In the seemingly well-rehearsed and faultlessly played Sibelius concerto, his good work was noticeable, if not particularly distinctive. But in the second half of the program – Prokofiev's *Ugly Duckling*, op. 18, and the first of the three *Cinderella Suites* (op. 107) he led a marvelously playing BSO to such grandeur that Maestro Temirkanov wouldn't be missed even if he didn't return until his farewell performance of Mahler's second symphony. "Fairy Grandmother and Winter" was particularly well structured and the concluding "Midnight" scene was rousing. He was visibly pleased with the orchestra and the orchestra with itself. In a way it was Constantine who was the concert's real discovery.

Before that there was also the well-sung *Duckling* by American mezzo Barbara Rearick. To sing a work like this in the vernacular instead of the original language certainly makes sense – as it does especially with all those story-driven works of a less serious nature where the cuteness of the text plays a significant role next to the music that supports it. The better of these works can stand on their own musically, but much more is gained by making understandable to the audience just when the duck stumbles, than might be lost by switching from the natural rhythm of one language to a foreign tongue. Ms. Rearick's good diction supported this choice.

Before Khachatryan's appearance, the orchestra introduced itself with one of its fanfares rather than an orchestra member's speech (much appreciated), but Adolphus Hailstork's *Intrada* was slight and the applause mild. The Sibelius was a different story, altogether. Unfailing and soft in the beginning with a beautiful slow crescendo; an assertive *piano* slowly melting into a modest but commanding *mf*. Khachatryan's sound had a few wooden moments after that, but soon returned to his pleasant tone that reminds a little of the leathery late Milstein's – just less focused. That alone is highest possible praise and, despite Sergey Khachatryan's nascent stardom, highly regarded recordings, and his standing as one of the young violinists 'to watch', overshooting a little. No doubts that his command of instrument and work are splendid and his performance notably more assured than the recent one of Ryo Goto who was supported paternally, lovingly, by Ashkenazy's direction. But his vibrato – especially in the slow movement – was applied in liberal quantities, to a point where one hopes it doesn't get much wider... and the beginning of the finale (*Allegro ma non tanto*, in this case a.k.a. "as fast as you can play it") was less than coherent in a few moments, his *Huggins* revealing a bit of a boxy sound in the low register. But then the last passages of this fiendishly difficult concerto and movement were exemplary again and worth having gone to Strathmore for, alone. Khachatryan a great violinist? Yes: In the making.