

Symphonia's French program a little over the top

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Lindsay Garritson.

It's no secret that music education in the public schools is not what it was decades ago, when there was a middlebrow consensus that it was a good thing for an educated person to know the rudiments of music and major figures of the Western classical tradition.

In our time, there are few concerts anymore that are not also educational, in which presenters and performers make sure to teach the audiences something about the music they're going to hear.

That's all to the good; if people can increase their enjoyment by hearing about Beethoven's deafness or J.S. Bach's 20 children, I'm all for it. And it was in that spirit that Alastair Willis, until recently director of the Illinois Symphony, led the Symphonia Boca Raton on Feb. 19 in an all-French program featuring music by seven different composers from the late 19th to the mid 20th centuries.

Willis and the Symphonia decided to give all the program notes from the stage of the Roberts Theater, as Willis strapped on a portable mic and talked about each of the pieces. Controversially, this American conductor chose to deliver these introductions with a French accent, so zat all of ees commen-tar-ee sounded like zees, *n'est-ce pas?*

I don't think it was necessary, though you could make the case that in order to underline the connections between the pieces, it worked better if the audience felt like they were at an event where the mood was relaxed and engaging. Leaving aside the Pepe LePew aspect, it certainly made a difference in understanding one of the works on the program, Jacques Ibert's *Divertissement*.

But I digress, *mes amis*. The other major focus of the afternoon was a soloist, pianist Lindsay Garritson, who took center stage for the Piano Concerto (in G) of Maurice Ravel. Garritson, whose sister Ashley sat not far away in the Symphonia's cello section, is a fine and technically accomplished pianist who handled all of Ravel's Lisztian filigree with aplomb. In the slow movement, she played with tenderness and clarity, which is exactly what this beautiful, gentle music requires.

After a substantial ovation from the audience, Garritson returned for Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, but in a solo-and-orchestra arrangement. That, too, was unnecessary; we'd rather have heard Garritson all by herself.

The first half contained six short pieces, tied together with Willis's energetic talk. A clean, well-played orchestration of the Ballet movement from Debussy's *Petite Suite* was followed by the very brief orchestral prologue to Bizet's opera *The Pearl Fishers*. Willis then discussed Les Six, the composers grouped around Jean Cocteau, asking the audience to call out some of their names. After that little bit of historical information, Willis led the Symphonia in works by two of the composers, Arthur Honegger and Darius Milhaud.

Honegger's *Pastorale d'Été*, a warm, sensual piece with some lovely horn playing, was directed with care by Willis, who made sure to keep everything smooth and steady. The audience loved this work, which was followed by an excerpt from Milhaud's once-familiar ballet *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* (Op. 58). Milhaud's popularity has largely vanished since his death in 1974, but he might be ripe for a comeback. The few minutes from the score offered here were charming and witty, and the orchestra played them with gusto.

The *Pavane* (in F-sharp minor, Op. 50) of Gabriel Fauré was next, one of the composer's loveliest tunes. Flutist Karen Dixon played her low-register opening solo with great beauty. Debussy's *Golliwog's Cakewalk*, a piece of ragtime evoking a doll that now would be considered quite racist (to say nothing of the name "golliwog" itself), came next. Willis made a point of illustrating the *Tristan und Isolde* reference Debussy includes in this piece, having the orchestra play the first few bars of Wagner's prelude before returning to the Debussy, which was dispatched with vigor and sparkle.

Preceding the second half's Ravel concerto was the Ibert *Divertissement*, which is based on a farce called *The Italian Straw Hat*. Willis broke down the action of the play, for which Ibert's music was an incidental score, which added a lot to audience appreciation. Ensemble was a little shaky in the early going, but overall, the Symphonia gave a strong and vibrant reading of this durable piece of French impishness.

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