

Conductor Schwarz, cellist son shine for Boca's Symphonia

Written by Greg Stepanich on 12 January 2015.



The eminent American conductor Gerard Schwarz, who has done so much for orchestra building and for American music of the 20th century, made a return appearance to Boca Raton on Sunday in the company of another returnee, his cellist son Julian.

Schwarz led the Symphonia Boca Raton in the second concert of its current season, and he demonstrated not only his excellence as a director but also his skill at choosing repertory, which is critical for chamber orchestras of Boca's size.

But more on that later. The big excitement of the afternoon concert at the Roberts Theater on the campus of St. Andrew's School in western Boca was Julian, who gave a rousing performance of the Cello Concerto No. 1 (in A minor, Op. 33) of Camille Saint-Saëns. This is a work that has been comfortably in the repertory for decades and yet never seems to make the lists of all-time great cello concertos. It's not exceptionally deep music, but it's not trying to be, and its communicative ease tends to obscure how skillfully written it is.

It's muscular music, too, despite its Classical-style orchestral modesty and restraint, and the two Schwarzes made expert partners in bringing that out. Julian Schwarz, who graduated from the Julliard School only last year, is an exciting cellist, a player of

formidable technique and a dark, soulful tone color that is at its most striking in slower, lyrical passages such as the second section of this one-movement, three-part work.

The Symphonia — with Miami Symphony concertmaster Daniel Andai sitting in the lead violinist's chair — and the Schwarzes got right down to the crisp, athletic business of the concerto, from the first A minor gut-punch into the cascading-triplets main theme, driving forward with impressive energy. The B-flat major minuet for strings in the middle was presented with extraordinary softness, a real pianissimo, which made a huge contrast with the music that came before and allowed the soloist to soar tenderly above it at his first entrance.

Throughout, Julian Schwarz played with fire and beauty, and the Symphonia accompanied him ideally well. After a third curtain call for the vociferous, standing house, Schwarz played an encore: the Caprice No. 9 (in D, Op. 25, No. 9) for solo cello of the 19th-century Italian cellist and teacher Alfredo Piatti. Schwarz began this exercise in triplets with wit, playing the first bar slower than the rest, as if he were just winding up a perpetual-motion machine. His technique was again impressive, getting the repeated double stops nicely in tune so that the work's harmonic progression could easily be followed.

The concert opened with three movements from the Divertimento (Op. 86) of Richard Strauss, an eight-movement mashup of keyboard works by the early 18th-century French master François Couperin. The original pieces are important ones in the development of the keyboard, and many of the individual miniatures are popular outside the *ordres* in which Couperin assembled them for publication.

Strauss' work is a tour de force of orchestration, with beautiful colors from keyboard and harp to add to his big, luminous texture. It's hard to get the sound of the usual massive Strauss orchestra out of the memory when listening to a chamber version of the work, but this was a fresh and interesting piece of programming.

The Symphonia sounded somewhat shaky in the first movement (*La visionnaire*), as if its footing was hard to find; most of that I lay at the feet of the piece itself, which has a relentless busy-ness about it that makes it hard to warm up to. There was a lovely, soothing quality about the performance of the second movement, with its long drone at the

bottom of the music, but some more distinct colors would have been welcome in the individual pieces. The third movement was bright and somewhat hard-edged, but well-played, and the solo hornist did a good job with the high-stepping descending line that plays such a key role in the movement.

The Strauss is a refreshing change of pace from the usual chamber selections, and the same was doubly true of the first piece on the second half, an arrangement by Benjamin Britten of the second movement of Mahler's Third Symphony ("What the Wildflowers Tell Me").

Performances of the Third Symphony in South Florida, to say nothing of the rest of the country, are exceedingly rare, and Britten has done orchestras such as the Symphonia a great service by crafting this pruned version of the movement.

Much of Mahler's distinctive style comes from the gigantic contrast between the language of swollen late Romanticism and exquisite chamber-music delicacy that live side-by-side in his huge symphonies. And Britten's arrangement works superbly well to illuminate Mahler's chamber style; everything can be heard with clarity.

The Symphonia played admirably here, with a good Austrian country dance feel in the opening bars, and sharply executed buzzing sixteenths in the contrasting section (foreshadowing the rhetoric of much of the Fourth Symphony). It was marvelous to hear this music, and with the sole exception of a slightly muddy ending, it was a stellar performance.

The concert closed with a forceful, powerful reading of the First Symphony (in C, Op. 21) of Beethoven. As in the Saint-Saëns, Schwarz's emphasis here was on sinew and strength, and his first movement was full of the light and shade that Beethoven so often calls for; he added extra emphasis to the four-note cadence just before the downward slide passage in the cellos, a nice effect that was messy the first time through but spot-on the second time it came around.

The slow movement moved along at a good pace, with string playing of great tenderness in the introductory material. The minuet, which is nothing of the kind but actually a

scherzo, was aggressive and thrilling, and in the trio, the violins played their rapid scales with ghostly quiet.

Schwarz showed his further mettle as a conductor in the way he led the Symphonia from the jokey scale setup in the first violins into the main theme. The move from the last note into the first note of the theme was almost imperceptible, so that the theme was underway before the listener was quite aware of it.

This was a fine and memorable performance of this symphony, with the orchestra happy to follow Schwarz's lead and doing their best for him. One hopes, as I've said before, that a more permanent role for this singular musician and leader can be found at The Symphonia. It's clearly a partnership that pays major musical dividends, and the orchestra would be wise to see it continue.

Conductor Alexander Platt returns to the helm of the Symphonia for its next concert, scheduled for 3 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 22, at the Roberts Theater. Violinist Gareth Johnson and violist Scott O'Donnell will be featured in Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante on a program that also includes Philip Glass's Company, the Symphony in C of Georges Bizet, and the Classical Symphony of Prokofiev. Call 866-687-4201 or visit www.thesymphonia.org for more information.