

Violinist Mracek shows star potential at Boca Symphonia

December 5, 2016 By Greg Stepanich — 0 Comments



One of the joys of being a music critic is getting a chance to have an early encounter with a major talent you've never heard before.

You don't know when that's going to happen, but it comes as a sure thing when it does. And Sunday afternoon at the Roberts Theater, it happened: An audience got to hear a young standout, new to American audiences, who it seems to me stands a good chance to enjoy a major violin career.

His name is Jan Mráček, and he is a 25-year-old musician from Pilsen, in the Czech Republic. The 2014 winner of the Fritz Kreisler Competition, he made his American debut last month in St. Louis, and this week he's in South Florida. In addition to his appearance with The Symphonia Boca Raton on Sunday afternoon, he'll appear with the same group Thursday night at the Broward Center for the Arts in Fort Lauderdale.

At the Roberts, Mráček was the soloist in the Brahms Violin Concerto, which is one of the most rewarding, but most difficult concertos in the repertoire, as well as one of the longest. It often sounds like a struggle for the soloist, with its big triple stops, its gigantic first-movement cadenza and its tricky finale.

But when Mráček played it, there was no sense of sweat or grimacing to overcome Brahms's challenges. His playing instilled confidence from the beginning that he was going to be able to play the piece well, and that he did. And it wasn't just about virtuoso showmanship: The entrance of the second theme in the first movement, and of the main theme of the second, were beautifully tender without being overwrought or mawkish.

Mráček's sense of restraint enabled him to give a muscular, expansive and precise account of this concerto, and at the same time a reading that made this work sound less awkward, as it can so often do when the soloist is not up to the music's demands. He simply gave a strong, sweeping, musically intelligent performance of this important concerto, and fulfilled its promises, and his.

The Symphonia had scheduled a second piece, the charming *Mazurek* of Mráček's countryman Antonin Dvořák, but artistic director Jeffrey Kaye said Mráček wanted to do a solo encore instead, which turned out to be the *Recitative and Scherzo Caprice* (Op. 6) of Fritz Kreisler. Mráček gave it a first-class, spotless performance, with all of its complicated double and triple-stopping perfectly in tune, which is critical for the Recitative, a moody, harmonically eccentric piece that evokes the extravagant music of its dedicatee, the great Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe.

He took the Scherzo at an inhumanly fast pace, tossing off its sparkling high-register acrobatics and boisterous chord figures like so much diamond dust. Again, his intonation was something to marvel at: All the stops were spot-on, and he ended the piece with a smart bit of theatrics, plucking the final F chord with the violin held hanging down from the end of his outstretched left arm. The audience at the Roberts Theater loved it, though they would have stayed for the Dvořák, too, had the orchestra and Mráček decided to add that (and I would have liked to hear it).

With an accuracy of intonation and technical accomplishment that puts the listener in mind of people like Joshua Bell and Itzhak Perlman, Jan Mráček is probably capable of playing just about anything in the repertoire. The one thing he lacks is a big sound, which could be a drawback for certain kinds of listeners who like to be overwhelmed, and so he may find solo recitals and chamber music to be his best bet. But I'd be astounded if he didn't make some kind of serious mark on the world of music at large.

Mráček was sensitively accompanied by the Symphonia, led Sunday by James Judd. And although the Florida Philharmonic that Judd once led has been gone for 13 years now, this concert was a reminder that the British conductor was an excellent fit for the South Florida musical community. He knows how to get good results from his players, and at his best he directs with real distinction.

He opened with the *Egmont* overture of Beethoven, and led it with ferocity. The opening chords were played with huge, stretched accents, prelude to a highly dramatic traversal of this familiar music. The orchestra responded well to Judd's approach, unleashing a surprising amount of power for its size in the joyful coda.

The other work on the program was the Fourth Symphony (in C minor, D. 417), the so-called *Tragic*, of a teenage Franz Schubert, who wrote it 200 years ago this past April. The music is more stern and urgent than it is tragic, but it is a well-written, skillful piece that should turn up more often on symphonic programs.

Judd and the Symphonia gave the work a solid, enjoyable reading, with good drama in the minor-key section of the second movement, a forceful scherzo and a well-paced finale.

The Symphonia Boca Raton *performs at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts's Amaturio Theater at 8 p.m. Thursday in a repeat of the Sunday program with violinist Jan Mráček. Visit browardcenter.org or call 954-462-0222; tickets start at \$25.*

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