

CONCERT CRITIQUE—NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

It took a Finnish conductor, who currently helms the Minnesota Orchestra, to brighten the afternoon in a winter that just will not let go.

Osmo Vänskä led the National Symphony Orchestra in a concert at the Kennedy Center on Friday, March 4, 2005, which featured three works: *The Oceanides*, Op. 73, by his fellow Finlander Jean Sibelius (1865-1957); Johannes Brahms' Concerto in D major for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 77; and Sibelius' three-movement Symphony No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 82. *The Oceanides*, a first, according to the *Playbill*, for the National Symphony Orchestra, is a piece whose brevity is well outweighed by its depth, while the Symphony is a challenge for the novice. The highlight of the program, with respect to the conductor's heritage, was a Romantic German's concerto featuring a violin soloist, Lisa Batiashvili from the former Soviet Republic of Georgia, which initially attracted this listener to the concert.

An early arrival, as well as a seat in the left stage box (accessed by a long, isolated hallway off of which one suspects that the Phantom of the Opera may lurk) permitted detailed observation of the orchestra, as well as some exposure to the polyphony and polyrhythmia of practice. Up close, the individuality, rather than uniformity, of both instruments and performers was striking. No two cellos were of the same color; ranging from reddish caramel to dark honey. One harp was blond; the other brunette. Some performers arrived a half-hour early for diligent practice; jocular others, just before the performance.

The conductor displayed an elegance in keeping with the grand claret carpets, teak walls, and golden harlequin balconies of the Kennedy Center Concert Hall. Vänskä

exuded a commanding gravitas upon taking the stage, gave the orchestra an avuncular look, and set the music into action with a shake not only of his baton, but of a gray mane of hair that rivals Michael Jackson's attorney. His is a quiet, rather than a demonstrative, leadership, but he is capable of sternness, as when he refused to recommence the program following the intermission and subjected some tardy audience members to his watchful eye as they straggled in. He conveys a justifiable pride in his native selections, and his background as a clarinetist is also reflected in the attention he frequently focused on that instrument and its fellow woodwinds.

The program began with *The Oceanides*, which the *Playbill* advises was composed by Sibelius, who straddled the Romantic/Nationalistic period and the Twentieth Century, in 1914 for presentation at a Connecticut music festival conducted by the composer. Due to its complexity, it feels like longer than its ten minutes, but pleasantly so. In triple meter, the strings emulated the fluctuation of the tides. It was a swirling, homophonic piece, with the other instruments accompanying the often obvious flutes, which seem to represent surfing nymphs. Smooth harmonies were followed by the two harps, which presaged and transitioned into a building crescendo. This listener, seated immediately above and behind the two harpists, was awed by the strength and girth of their hands as they plucked and executed the *arpeggios*. While one frequently associates harps with lightness—and there were moments when they provided it on top of the underlying double basses—these also exhibited an unusual presence and fortitude, yet were smooth. The cellos and double basses built a suspenseful sense of storm, with a consequent feeling of a need for resolution. The brass provided a thunderous presence. There was a sense of minor key as the crescendo built, then a sprightly clarinet signaled a

clear major key. According to the *Playbill*, Sibelius viewed *The Oceanides* as one of his favorites among his works. With its swirling, rather than linear, progression, it leaves the listener feeling pleasantly immersed.

Brahms' only Violin Concerto, written in D major, has the three-part structure typical of a classical or romantic concerto: the first movement is fast, in this case, *allegro non troppo*, fast but not too fast; the second is a slow *adagio*; and the final is also fast, here *allegro giocoso, ma non troppo vivace—Poco più presto*, which, according to this writer's Italian dictionary, is playfully fast but not too lively, then a little more very fast. Reflecting the essence of a concerto, it featured a solo instrument, in this case the violin, with an orchestra. The piece was written in 1878 for Brahms' friend and mentor Joseph Joachim, one of the great violinists of that period, who introduced Brahms (1833-1897) to the love of his life, Clara Schumann. While it is apparently uncertain how much input Joachim had in the composition, he provided the cadenza (a "virtuosic solo passage" according to our textbook) performed by Ms. Batiashvili at this concert. Clearly Joachim appreciated the Concerto's challenge, commenting in a *Playbill* quote that the piece was "not *for* the violin, but *against* it."

The Concerto is a multi-textural piece—homophonic, given the nature of the orchestral accompaniment of the violin, and polyphonic from time to time as the single violin and the orchestra engage in dialogue or compete with one another for dominance. The solo violin did not appear until about three minutes into the first movement, following a processional introduction by the orchestra that smacked of Aaron Copland grandeur. At one point, the single violin was accompanied by French horns that held a lengthy single note, which reminded this listener of the tenor line in the Middle Ages

organum. Indeed, it is not surprising to read on our textbook's Web site that Brahms was a student of Renaissance music. From time to time, the whole orchestra imitated the violin's triple meter melody, then all came together to perform it again with a big flourish. The variety in this movement was striking; sometimes the violins answered the soloist on an equal footing; sometimes they provided support.

This listener was impressed by the large range of the solo violin, with the movement of the melody frequently conjunct, and by the moments of double-bowing. The performer's tremendous physical exertion and immersion into the piece were especially impressive. Her concentration was so total that, to paraphrase another musician with whom I spoke recently, she "played as she breathed." Ms. Batiashvili, who has performed all over the world despite being only in her mid-twenties, appeared in a pastel blue spaghetti-strap gown that displayed the physical tension of her muscles as she performed the challenging piece. The crystals in her barrettes and earrings flashed during frenetic moments, providing a visual echo of the rough-cut crystal chandeliers in the Kennedy Center Concert Hall.

The second movement, the *Adagio*, began with woodwinds and French horn, and sounded like multiple woodwind quintets performing simultaneously. The music was slow and *piano*, the strings entered on one note, followed by the soloist. There was nevertheless a sense of building even as the melancholy solo violin predominated. Its beseeching soprano lingered from time to time and reminded one of moments in Maria Callas's performance of *La mama morte* from *Andrea Chénier*. The duple meter movement became very quiet and slow, ending on a peaceful note.

The last movement was also *allegro*, beginning quite fast and sprightly in strong triple meter as the orchestra strutted the *forte* melody and drove it home. The soloist retook the piece with a vengeance, as the orchestra receded into the background in a plucking staccato that contrasted with her smooth dramatic passage. The quick alternation between the orchestra and the soloist in the movement made it the most dramatic part of the piece. There were moments when rather than conversing with or supporting the solo violin, the orchestra seemed instead to be imitating and mocking it. When the horns and the rest of the orchestra came in, the intensity built, and just when it appeared that the orchestra had taken over, the monophonic soloist reappeared. The piece ended on a grand, satisfying note.

Since the foregoing initial thoughts based on attending the concert, this writer has had occasion to listen to other performances of the Concerto on CD—Itzak Perlman's performances with the Berlin Philharmonic (1992) and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1976), and Yuhudi Menuhin's interpretation with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra from the late 1940's. The later performance by Perlman is most reminiscent of Ms. Batiashvili's performance, demonstrating a greater sense of lightness than the other two, with Menuhin's the heaviest and most serious. In part, this difference seems to be due to the greater relative volume on the part of the orchestra, but both the orchestral and the Menuhin performances definitely exhibit a slower tempo, with Menuhin's pauses almost imperceptibly longer. One wonders if our faster-paced society has influenced contemporary interpretations of the masters.

When this reviewer expresses a strong preference for the Brahms Concerto in this program, it is not meant to diminish the other pieces. Perhaps the Concerto is easier to

like because of its passion and the individuality expressed by the solo instrument, qualities favored by this culture, and Brahms, after all, began his career playing crowd-pleasing music in dance halls, according to our textbook. *The Oceanides* is delightful, but somewhat confined by its subject—how many times can the waves go in and out before the listener’s attention wanders—and this may account for Sibelius’s decision to keep the piece short. The Symphony, completed in 1915, was, at least on first hearing, less passionate than the Concerto, perhaps reflecting the nature of the swans that, according to the *Playbill*, inspired the piece. Furthermore, it was not so obvious to this listener where it was attempting to go, although perhaps the composer chose not to have the piece “go” anywhere too obviously. Its complexity would be best appreciated upon multiple listenings. Nevertheless, the conjunct nature of the melody, the edgy drama generated by the contrast between the *tremolo* of the violins and the pastoral woodwinds, and the fact that so many instruments seemed to get an individual moment of clear focus made it a highly interesting piece. Its abrupt end, with five notes interspersed between noticeable pauses, was a dramatic finish to a lively program that brought this listener and others to their feet.