March 15, 2023

Princeton Symphony Orchestra Presents Unique World Premiere

By Nancy Plum

This past weekend, Princeton Symphony Orchestra presented the world premiere of a piece featuring instruments rarely heard in orchestral works. Led by guest conductor Sameer Patel, the Orchestra performed American composer and violinist William Harvey’s Seven Decisions of Gandhi with the composer as violin soloist, musical artist Dibyarka Chatterjee playing the Hindustani tabla, with the added orchestral color of the sitar, played by Snehesh Nag. Saturday night’s performance (the concert was repeated Sunday afternoon) teamed Harvey’s work with late 19th-century Russian music of Alexander Borodin and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, taking the audience at Richardson Auditorium on a musical ride of dynamic contrasts and rich orchestral writing.

Following a spirited performance of Alexander Borodin’s “Polovtsian Dances” from the opera Prince Igor, conductor Patel led the instrumentalists in Harvey’s emotional and creatively scored Seven Decisions of Gandhi, a concerto for violin and orchestra. A violinist, composer, and conductor, Harvey has successfully pursued all three of these tracks in his career and has explored performance and music in some of the more under-represented areas of the world. Rooted in the concept that we are all defined by our decisions, Seven Decisions of Gandhi musically captured seven decisions made by global nonviolence icon Mohandas K. Gandhi throughout his lifetime. Dedicated to Gandhi’s granddaughter, Harvey’s 2020 work is based on what the composer called “magisterial biographies,” as well as his own experience performing in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

Harvey cleverly wove Gandhi’s life into the piece. Individual movements represented key moments in the Gandhi’s life, culminating in a momentous tragedy in the struggle for human rights and Gandhi’s own emergence from exile to rejoin the fight for self-rule. Specific instruments depicted a wide range of characters, including conflicting religions, tools of daily life, and opposing
nationalities. Harvey also incorporated traditional Hindi sung prayers into the music, and the culture was reaffirmed by the tabla and sitar.

The Hindustani tabla is a pair of twin hand drums (although player Chatterjee had an additional drum) and is a key instrument in certain devotional traditions. The separate drums seemed to be pitched differently; seated on the floor, Chatterjee added both percussion and tonal color to the music. Harvey scored the tabla into the movement depicting Gandhi’s commitment to nationalism, as well as the final section describing Gandhi’s 1930 “Salt March.” The closing movement in particular captured history with the use of hymns of the time, as Harvey and Chatterjee were joined by Snehesh Nag playing resonant and crystalline sitar lines. As solo violinist, Harvey maneuvered extended improvisatory and technically difficult passages, showing his solid training from Juilliard and Indiana University. The fifth movement “Khadi” was a poignant commentary featuring Harvey and harpist André Tantiles in a simple yet affecting segment which could easily be excerpted for performance on its own. Expressive wind and brass solos abounded throughout Harvey’s orchestration, including from clarinetist Pascal Archer, flutist Anthony Trionfo, and tuba player Jon Fowler.

Patel paired Harvey’s programmatic concerto with another storytelling piece. Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 6 in B Minor showed the composer’s lush orchestration in a work said to depict forbidden love. In Saturday night’s performance, Patel allowed the Orchestra a great deal of room for expression, beginning with bassoonist Nik Hooks’ plaintive opening solo. The first movement progressed with a sense of urgency, with each repetition of the thematic material changing the mood slightly. The orchestral texture was well colored by clarinetist Archer and bass clarinetist Gi Woo Lee, and clean trombone sectional playing added to the dramatic ebb and flow.

The second movement “Waltz” was sufficiently quirky in 5/4 time, with wide variety in dynamics. This work was unusual in that the third movement “Allegro” sounded more like a closing than the final “Adagio,” prompting the audience to show their appreciation early for Patel’s crystal clear conducting and imaginative approach to the music. The Orchestra closed the symphony well, with players reaching into the depth of their instruments’ registers to convey Tchaikovsky’s despair. As with many of this composer’s orchestral works, brass chorales gave the music a distinctly Russian flavor, as Patel and the Princeton Symphony Orchestra successfully ended the evening with music low in the string sections.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra will present its next Classical Series concerts on Saturday, May 13 at 8 p.m. and Sunday, May 14 at 4 p.m. in Richardson Auditorium. Conducted by Rossen Milanov, these concerts will feature violist Roberto Díaz and music of Julia Perry, George Gershwin, and Hector Berlioz. Ticket information can be obtained by visiting princetonsymphony.org.
Princeton Symphony Orchestra Presents Unique World Premiere | Town Topics

Search

Search...

Weather forecast

CURRENT ISSUE