

Husband and wife soloists Pinchas Zukerman and Amanda Forsyth join MSO in a mustn't-miss concert

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Isthmus

John W. Barker

Feb 6, 2010

On its opening night, Friday in Overture Hall, the Madison Symphony Orchestra's latest program yielded that rarity, the perfect concert, when everything comes together just right. Guest soloists can be a drag as much as a blessing, but this time we had a welcome pair of them, a husband-and-wife team no less: Pinchas Zukerman, familiar as both violinist and conductor, and cellist Amanda Forsyth. Each had a solo number with the orchestra, and the two joined in a duo.

Forsyth started with Max Bruch's beloved "Kol Nidrei," a fantasy on a Hebraic melody, revealing a richly rounded tone. Then Zukerman directed a reduced (but still ample) orchestra in Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5, the "Turkish," with himself as soloist. His move into conducting has not dulled his virtuosity as a violinist. He still plays with confidence, but also with appropriately elegant grace -- even with touches of humor, in the episode in the finale imitating the Turkish Janissary music that gives the work its nickname. Notable, too, was his confidence in the orchestra. He recognized the need for only minimal conducting and treated the ensemble as trusty colleagues.

After the intermission, the two soloists joined in a novelty by Camille Saint-Saëns, a 15-minute fantasy with orchestra titled "The Muse and the Poet". The title need not be taken too seriously. While it is true that sometimes the violin (the "Muse") introduces ideas that the cello (the "Poet") then takes up, their roles are actually quite balanced, and the cello even has some of the livelier passages. The composer himself preferred to think of it as "a conversation between the two instruments instead of a debate between two virtuosos" -- as Michael Allsen's always-excellent program notes point out. The two soloists seemed to find particular meaning in this pairing, and Forsyth's playing took on particular vivacity in her interaction with her partner.

Saint-Saëns remained in the spotlight. His Symphony No. 3, nicknamed the "Organ Symphony," is unusual in its amplified scoring (four-hand piano and organ, with the large orchestra), as well as in the structural fusion of traditional movement form. It's also an extravaganza whose grandiose conclusion is guaranteed to bring an audience to its feet. Music director John DeMain had conducted it in the special 2004 concert inaugurating the then-brand-new Overture Hall. But he has also wanted to offer it to the regular subscription audience. His interpretation evidenced meticulous and analytical care from the outset, but in the service of clarifying structure and building wonderful, swelling climaxes. The orchestra responded triumphantly.

And, by the way, the work includes passages where the now-standardized separation of first and second violins pays off beautifully. Don't miss!

Soloist turned conductor leads engaging program

Capital Times

Lindsay Christians

Feb 6, 2010

Conducting with one hand and holding his violin in the other, Pinchas Zukerman turned the Madison Symphony Orchestra into his personal chamber ensemble on Friday night.

Their performance of Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5 was an exercise in attentive listening for the orchestra as well as the audience. Casual in an untucked, black button-down, Zukerman led the orchestra through the concerto's lightly skipping opening allegro, occasionally waving his bow in the direction of the second violins and violas. At times, Zukerman pushed the tempo and the orchestra fell behind. But to his credit, Zukerman's full tone and brilliant ornamentation soon redirected attention to his bow.

Mozart wrote his fifth violin concerto in 1775, when he was not yet 20. In Zukerman's hands, the bright folk-sounding strains for which it was nicknamed "the Turkish" seemed like a natural extension of the playfulness of the rest of the piece.

John DeMain returned to the podium and Zukerman joined his wife, cellist Amanda Forsyth, on Camille Saint-Saëns' rarely performed "The Muse and the Poet." Written in 1910 toward the end of the composer's life, "Muse" was an endearing 16-minute exchange between soloists, backed by lush, romantic textures in the orchestra. He was the muse, she was the poet; they traded ideas, argued and finally, harmonized.

Forsyth, stunning in a strapless butter-yellow gown, opened the concert with the meditative "Kol Nidrei" by Max Bruch. Once a favorite of the MSO, the group hasn't performed this chant-inspired work in more than 50 years. Forsyth's performance was rich and lyrical, the insistence of the backing strings contrasting with her mournful solo line.

The evening closed with another work by Saint-Saëns, the Organ Symphony No. 3. Samuel Hutchison played a sparse accompaniment on MSO's beautiful organ for nearly 30 minutes before Saint-Saëns let him burst out with a hall-shaking chord (wake up, Overture Hall!).

Last performed at the opening of Overture in 2004, the Organ Symphony is considered one of Saint-Saëns' most characteristic works, inspired by and dedicated to Franz Liszt (who died the year it was completed, 1886).

Performed by a massive orchestra including cymbals, four hands piano and tuba, the symphony opened like a mighty wind or tornado, then shrunk to a whisper during a long *poco* adagio. It sprung to life again for the second movement, an *allegro moderato* with exuberant phrases that sounded like a child racing around the house.

In total, it was an accessible and intriguing program. The symphony took chances, and a good many of them worked.

Violinist Pinchas Zukerman, MSO Captivate Audience

Channel 3000

William R. Wineke

Feb 6, 2010

The Madison Symphony Orchestra brought famed violinist Pinchas Zukerman to headline its weekend series of concerts Friday night -- and then stole the show away from him.

It's not that Zukerman, who is making his fourth appearance with the MSO (previously, in 1974, 2001 and 2007) wasn't a star. The capacity audience in Overture Hall cheered his interpretation of Mozart's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra.

It's just that when the orchestra, accompanied by Samuel Hutchison on the hall's pipe organ, blasted through Camille Saint-Saens' "Organ Symphony," the audience almost leaped to its feet collectively before the piece ended.

The symphony features piano and organ, timpani and trumpet and ends, in the words of J. Michael Allsen, who writes the program notes, "in joyous fury." So the orchestra almost overshadowed Zukerman -- but not quite.

After four decades on the concert stage, Zukerman, 60, can handle an audience. The Mozart concerto calls for a reduced-size string orchestra and Zukerman conducted the orchestra as well as played the solo parts.

Possibly, the most difficult role of the evening belonged to Zukerman's wife, cellist Amanda Forsyth, however. Although she has an international reputation in her own right, Forsyth is, let's face it, married to one of the most celebrated musicians in the world. She also has white-blond hair that falls almost to her waist and was wearing a cream-colored evening gown Friday.

Why do those observations make her job difficult? It was difficult because she played Max Bruch's "Kol Nidrei." The Kol Nidrei is the prayer recited in the synagogue at the beginning of the evening service of Yom Kippur. It is, then, a very, very somber concept, one you usually don't think of in connection with a blonde artist in an evening dress.

It's a testament to Forsyth's artistry that, within moments of her beginning notes, the entire hall seemed to echo the strains of a synagogue prayer as the haunting notes of her cello transported the audience into a new level of consciousness.

Zukerman and Forsyth also joined the orchestra in another Saint-Saens piece, "The Muse and the Poet," which also brought the audience to its feet. So, the Friday night audience gave Zukerman a standing ovation, Zukerman and Forsyth a standing ovation and the orchestra a standing ovation. Three in one night is unusual, even for the normally enthusiastic MSO audience.