

Symphony review: Verdi, Bruch and Shostakovich played with precision and beauty

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Hagen is the guest violinist with the Jacksonville Symphony Thursday-Saturday playing Bruch's Violin Concerto in G Minor.

Giuseppe Verdi was to Italian opera what Beethoven was to the symphony. Of his more than two dozen operas, spanning 54 years from *Oberto* to *Falstaff*, none has a more stirring or well-liked overture than “*La Forza del Destino*.”

The opera was first performed in 1862 and opened with a modest prelude. Verdi later reworked the opera in 1869 and replaced the prelude with a glorious full-scale overture that exhibits an assemblage of melodies from the opera. From the opening, guest conductor Michael Stern led the Jacksonville Symphony in a beautifully paced rendition of Verdi's overture. The musicians are with him every step of the way, delivering high-octane yet excellently disciplined playing of this dazzling work.

Max Bruch was regarded as one of the greatest composers in Germany in the latter half of the 19th century. Today, his name rings just two bells, both works for violin: his famous first violin concerto and his engaging “*Scottish Fantasy*.” It is on his first violin concerto that Bruch's reputation rests. First sketched out in 1857, it was his first large-scale orchestral work. Nothing wrong with being a one-hit wonder when your masterpiece is music of profound beauty, instantly likeable, passionate and resonating with depth.

For violinists, the concerto provides a profound showcase for the instrument. There are stunning, virtuosic passages that really do make the violin sing as it soars again and again. William Hagen's violin rises from the orchestra to ever-loftier heights with a performance that is as passionate as it is poignantly phrased. The second movement is pure romance. Hagen's beautiful tone captures the heartbreaking themes that are woven delicately within the soulfully played orchestral accompaniment. The energetic, gypsy-themed finale's rhythmic drive exudes vigor and yet resonates with rapture. The audience flew to its feet at the concerto's conclusion and at the playing of Hagen's encore, Bach's "Prelude in E Major."

The Tenth Symphony is probably my favorite Shostakovich symphony, and it is one of the most important symphonic compositions of the 20th century. The first movement is huge and imposing, a masterpiece of great emotional reach and profundity. It has been called "troublesome, wandering music." The movement requires complete commitment and, above all, concentration on the part of the conductor and the musicians if it's to make its mark. Stern ensures that the wandering is purposeful and he seems to have an excellent sense of the structure of the movement. Pacing is all-important here and the choice of tempo is pretty much spot-on.

The second movement is a brief scherzo and has been held by many observers to be a portrait of Stalin. Given the relentless brutality of the music, the notion is not surprising. The reason one is attracted to live performances is for the sense of drama that they provide. The audience was not disappointed as the strings' frenetically paced rhythmic figures coupled with the menace of the lower brass evoked graphic white-knuckled evocations of violence.

In the third movement the composer introduces himself into the music with a four-note motto derived from the German transliteration of his name: the initial of his first name and the first three letters of his last name D. Shostacovich (D/E flat/C/B or H in German). The flutes and clarinets first play this motive. Another motive represents one of his female pupils with whom he had affair, Elmira Nazirova (E-A-E-A). At the end of the movement the horn, played beautifully by Kevin Reid, obsesses on Elmira's motive while the piccolo and flute play D-S-C-H. Woodwind solos are the hallmark of this movement and all play with moving sensitivity.

The finale opens in a mood of intense melancholy. Here there are distinguished contributions from the principal oboist and bassoonist. On the face of it, when the main allegro bursts forth the music is extrovert, even high spirited. But, as so often with Shostakovich one just can't be sure.

Throughout this performance the Jacksonville Symphony offers very fine playing. As for the conductor, the performance serves to add further luster to his reputation.

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