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LIFE & ARTS

At the BPO, romance pours from a priceless violin



Violin virtuoso Vadim Gluzman, left, performs as conductor JoAnn Falletta leads the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra in a special Brahms concert Friday at Kleinhans. Charles Lewis/Buffalo News

*By Mary Kunz Goldman / News Staff Reporter / @MaryKunzGoldman
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This weekend's Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra is a trip back in time to the 19th century – in a glorious, glamorous way.

Music Director JoAnn Falletta is conducting Brahms' expansive First Symphony. The Israeli violinist Vadim Gluzman is playing the heart-rending Violin Concerto No. 1 of the German Romantic composer Max Bruch.

To complete the sepia-toned picture, Gluzman is playing a Stradivarius that dates to 1690 and was once owned by Hungarian virtuoso Leopold Auer (1845-1930).

We have an awareness of priceless violins here in Buffalo. The three owned by Clement and Karen Arrison turn up from time to time at Kleinhans Music Hall in the hands of various young artists. That could explain why, even in the cold light of day at Friday's Coffee Concert, I was swept away by the romance of it all. To think where this violin had been!

Gluzman invited such thoughts. Soviet-born, he seems like the big, strong, silent type. There is something moving in the way he responds so tenderly to the music, and in the gentle way he handles Auer's old violin. It made me think of a burly biker I once saw cradling a kitten. Gluzman is not the grandstanding type. His gestures barely invite you to look at him. But he has a smooth, direct singing tone that is good for this heart-rending music. He doesn't overdo it.

The orchestra picked up beautifully on the music's subtleties. The interlude that introduces the slow movement was breathtaking. The strings held a note that hung in the air and then faded, bit by bit, until you heard the honeyed tone of that Strad. Gluzman melted your heart with that melody, playing it just a little bit differently each time, adding a tremble here and there. The concerto ended with just the right flourish – enough to thrill you, but not flashy.

The delighted applause won an encore. Gluzman gave us an arch, artfully embellished take on the Gavotte from Bach's Violin Partita No. 3. Most people know this famous encore piece – even kids, because it was heard in "James and the Giant Peach." It was the perfect chaser for the rich concerto.

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