

Violinist Vadim Gluzman captivates in Brahms concerto, KC Symphony plays Beethoven with sly humor

By LIBBY HANSEN
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Humor and high style were impetuses for the Kansas City Symphony's performance Friday in Helzberg Hall.

The program, conducted by music director Michael Stern, combined pillars of 19th century music, Ludwig van Beethoven and Johannes Brahms, with an acclaimed modern American voice, John Adams. Soloist Vadim Gluzman joined them for Brahms' Violin Concerto.

Stern fed the energy of Adams' "The Chairman Dances – Foxtrot for Orchestra" by eschewing the traditional opening announcements. The work is built on a rapid succession of layered patterns, and it's necessary for everyone to be fully synched to achieve maximum impact. They very nearly hit the mark.

There were many exposed voices, with repetitive notes harder to lock into than would appear otherwise. The propulsive rhythms gave way to a melody of dreamlike harmonics. Within the busy strata piccolo and percussion had a solid connection. Interlocking rhythms of piano and drum set, along with the final shuffle of the sandpaper blocks, added a conclusive sense of drama.

There was similar attention to rhythmic features in Beethoven's delightful Symphony No. 4. The somber introduction, despite imperfect pizzicati, indicated consideration for the stresses of the line, consideration they maintained throughout. The dramatic transition launched the piece into the vigorous rhythmic workout that it is.

Beethoven included a handful of delicious surprises, which the orchestra presented with aplomb. The Adagio, featuring a delicate solo on clarinet, concluded with a bubbling figure traveling around the ensemble. A lighthearted third movement recalled that scherzo literally means joke, Beethoven transforming a bit of a throwaway, skipping-tone motif into a structural feature. Lastly, forceful down-bows and frequent dynamic resets generated an enticing finale.

While the Beethoven evoked a chuckle, the Brahms was a more muscular endeavor. The warm, enveloping tones of the cellos were quickly cast aside for a robust volley extended like a challenge, a challenge answered by soloist Gluzman.

With the air of a champion, he presented the gorgeous melody, balanced, sorrowful double-stops and a furious technical ability. His sound filled every nook in the hall during his captivating cadenza. Gluzman turned the second movement's theme, beautifully introduced by the oboe, into a passionate plea. A jocular accompaniment made way for runs in the last movement that were executed with the clarity and force of a master.

After four curtain calls, Gluzman and the orchestra concluded with a cleansing encore on Christoph Willibald Gluck's "The Dance of the Blessed Spirits."