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Vadim Gluzman delivers power and passion with SSO Classical review

A highlight of Thursday's Seattle Symphony concert was guest Vadim Gluzman's intensity and expressive range on the Bruch Violin Concerto, writes reviewer Melinda Bargreen. Michael Francis was guest conductor. The program repeats 8 p.m. March 16, 2013.

By Melinda Bargreen
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He has made a specialty of "saving the day" for other indisposed conductors at the last minute, but the young English maestro Michael Francis is now well on his way to making a career in his own right. His credentials — clarity, lyricism, and rapport with the musicians — were amply evident in his Thursday return to the Seattle Symphony, the orchestra with which he made his U.S. debut three years ago.

Formerly a bass player with the London Symphony, Francis may have a particular affinity for English music (works of Englishmen Michael Tippett and Edward Elgar are on the current program), but his musicality was equally evident in the Bruch Violin Concerto, with Vadim Gluzman as the soloist.

The concerto was certainly a program highlight: the Russian-born Gluzman plays with a big, powerful tone of tremendous intensity and great expressive range. Francis was with him in every measure, and the orchestra gave him supportive partnership. The Adagio movement was warmly lyrical; in the Finale, Gluzman seemed to spear the notes with incisive accuracy, generating so much excitement that the audience response demanded an encore. He responded with a jaunty, insouciant account of Bach's Gavotte from the solo Partita No. 3 in E major.

The orchestral works on the program — Tippett's "Ritual Dances" from the opera "The Midsummer Marriage" and Elgar's familiar "Enigma" Variations — share a common musical language, though Tippett's score is decidedly modern and Elgar's is richly romantic. Both present considerable challenges, particularly the Tippett, with its tricky flurries of scurrying notes and its frenetic, kaleidoscopic twists and turns. There were some inaccuracies in various sections, but Francis' firm hand elucidated the issues of tempo and interpretation so clearly that the overall result was quite wonderful. Several orchestral soloists outdid themselves with memorable solo work.

Francis brought a remarkable energy to the Elgar, which draws on almost every instrument in the orchestra (piccolo to tuba and contrabassoon) to spectacular effect. The "Enigma" Variations are a study in vivid contrasts, from the fluttering and flighty passages to the mighty gravity of the best-known variation, "Nimrod." The players gave an unusually expressive reading of the Elgar, with an especially rich string sound that Francis clearly elicited from the podium.

At the performance's conclusion, when the final crescendo brought in the full orchestra and the Watjen Concert Organ with bass stops that rival the rumble of a Boeing jet, and the energetic Francis was practically airborne off the podium, the total effect was staggering. It was a performance that made you realize yet again that there is nothing like the live sound of a great orchestra in a great hall. This is something no electronics, no earbuds, no smartphones or speakers or iDevices, can give you, try as they might. Don't miss a chance to hear this for yourself.

Melinda Bargreen also reviews concerts for 98.1 Classical KING FM. She can be reached at mbargreen@aol.com.