

Mark Kaplan

Performs the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto
with the New Bedford Symphony

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New Bedford Symphony season opens on a very high note

By Laurie Robertson-Lorant
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When an internationally acclaimed concert violinist who performs with some of the finest orchestras in Europe and the United States praises your local orchestra's conductor and instrumentalists, you hope the people who are still hedging their bets on the NBSO will hear about it and respond accordingly.

Such praise came from violinist **Mark Kaplan, who gave an outstanding performance** of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D Major as part of the NBSO's season opener. Under Maestro David MacKenzie's sensitive and intelligent direction, the orchestra articulated the structure and emotional logic of the work Tchaikovsky composed during the darkest period of his life. **Thanks to the exemplary musicianship of Mark Kaplan, Dr. MacKenzie and our own NBSO musicians, a romantic concerto that often winds up as little more than a loud, fast vehicle for solo violinists to show off their flashy technique revealed itself as a sustained exploration of human and harmonic relationships.**

Kaplan's self-effacing, contemplative demeanor and economy of motion are qualities all too rare in solo performances these days. Unlike the many soloists who self-consciously dramatize the transformative effect the piece they're playing has on them with ecstatic facial expressions and exaggerated body movements, Kaplan stood quietly, holding his magical instrument in his hands, then made an authoritatively restrained and beautiful entrance. His soulful playing of passionate gypsy-like melodies, devilishly rapid runs and attenuated treble notes of ethereal purity and grace revealed the concerto's beauty and its musical integrity. At times, especially during the fiercely difficult (and fleetingly treacherous) cadenza, his sweet 1685 Stradivarius seemed to be transmitting angelic music, not producing man-made melodies from Earth-bound materials.

Responding to Kaplan's finely nuanced revelation of the spiritual depths of the concerto, the orchestra played with gusto, precision and depth. The strings, led by Concertmaster Jesse Holstein, emulated Kaplan's mellow tone as well as his agility, and at times, the dialogue between the soloist and various sections of the orchestra — especially the cellos — achieved the intimacy of ensemble playing, which isn't easy in a work so grand and wild. After a celebratory display of virtuosity that expressed Tchaikovsky's reaffirmation of life, Kaplan bowed modestly to the bravo-studded applause and announced that out of respect for the 9/11 anniversary, he would play the Largo from Bach's 3rd Sonata for Violin as an encore rather than "something fast."

Concertgoers who rose to their feet to applaud this superb performance will be astonished to learn that this concerto was vilified by Viennese critics and is often denounced by music

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reviewers today. Perhaps the performances they heard were not as good as the NBSO's performance, which transformed a familiar concerto into a musical experience unexpectedly fresh and new.

Newness, in fact, is a major theme of the NBSO's 2011-2012 season. As Dr. MacKenzie announced in his pre-concert talk, the orchestra will be performing four works by contemporary composers. The first of these engagingly lyrical ("not jarringly dissonant") compositions was Michael Torke's "Bright Blue Music," composed in 1985, which opened the program. Torke has a neurological condition, synesthesia, that causes him to see colors when he hears sounds; for him, the key of D Major is bright blue. As I was wondering if Torke sees Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D Major as bright blue, my companion at the concert said he also sees colors when he hears music, but that Torke's piece was yellow to him, not blue.

Synesthetic variations aside, "Bright Blue Music" is a delightfully inventive piece characterized by and interplay of tonic chords and hiccupping waltz rhythms and brilliant orchestration. During his pre-concert talk, Dr. MacKenzie invited the audience to e-mail him their responses to the piece and describe any images the music evoked for them. I imagined a large party, with people talking in different voices and degrees of loudness while other tipsily lurched through waltzes played by a salon orchestra whose brasses, winds and various percussion instruments were merrily challenging the lyricism of the harp and strings. Mental pictures notwithstanding, I enjoyed the off-beat harmonies and rhythms as well as the orchestra's virtuosity.

The final piece on the program was Sergei Rachmaninoff's last work, "Symphonic Dances," which showed off the brilliance of each section of the orchestra as well as the leadership and artistry of the orchestra's Principals: Jesse Holstein, first violin; JiYun Jeong, second violin; Elisa Birdseye, viola; Shay Rudolph, cello; Timothy Macri, flute; Laura Shamu, oboe; Juliet Lai, clarinet; Sebastian Chaves, bassoon; Phillip Staeudlin, alto saxophone; Lee Wadenpfohl, French horn; Steve Banzaert, trumpet; Seth Budahl, trombone; Jobey Wilson, tuba; Eric Hube, timpani; Karl Seyferth, percussion; Tom Hajnacki, piano; and last but not least, Deborah Feld-Faisiewicz, harp. All members of the orchestra deserve praise for their fine articulation and their synchronicity.

At the post-concert reception, Maestro MacKenzie thanked Kaplan for playing for students at several of the city's middle schools and described the music-based literacy program Kaplan and cellist Rudolph are piloting for younger children. Praising Maestro MacKenzie and the orchestra, Kaplan exhorted concertgoers who attended the post-concert reception to spread the word so every seat in the Z would be filled for what promises to be another exciting season with the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra. Happily, the Z was nearly full for this season opener, and ticketholders were treated to an exceptionally fine concert, so if you haven't bought tickets yet, be sure to get them now!

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