

French music with a jazzy twist

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By: Larry Fuchsberg

ORCHESTRA REVIEW: Pianist Simone Dinnerstein combined freedom, control in bewitching Ravel concerto.



The first half of this week's Minnesota Orchestra program, led by Osmo Vänskä, extends the jazz orientation of last week's season opener, giving it a welcome Gallic twist (courtesy of Darius Milhaud and Maurice Ravel), and thereby inoculating the audience against the profoundly jazzless, post-intermission ordeal that is Richard Strauss' "Ein Heldenleben." Or so one hopes.

Milhaud -- "a Frenchman from Provence, and by religion a Jew," as his autobiography puts it -- was smitten with the "throbbing mixture of broken, twisted rhythms" he heard on a 1922 visit to Harlem; his bluesy ballet score "The Creation of the World," which premiered the following year, still sounds fresh. Vänskä, like many conductors, lards "Creation" with extra strings, endowing it with moments of unwanted symphonic plushness. But the performance swings. James Romain's sax is wonderfully expressive.

Ravel's Piano Concerto is "the greatest compliment ever paid by a European composer to American music," composer David Schiff says. The work's outer movements are full of energy and wit, but it's the Adagio that can rob the listener of sleep. For three glorious minutes the pianist, solo, sings a serene yet wistful air. Eventually the English horn borrows the melody, the piano accompanying.

Combining freedom and control, pianist Simone Dinnerstein is utterly in tune with this bewitching movement (which makes the same composer's "Boléro," played last week, sound hopelessly crude). Marni Hougham's English horn is winningly reticent.

Many pianists seek to launch their careers by playing big romantic concertos on the soul-corroding competition circuit. But Dinnerstein, daughter of American realist painter Simon Dinnerstein, has neatly sidestepped the competitive abyss, rocketing to prominence (as did Glenn Gould, her sometime idol) with an extraordinary CD of Bach's "Goldberg" Variations. She plays in public schools and prisons. The profession has much to learn from her.

Why do conductors persist in programming "Ein Heldenleben" (A Hero's Life), Strauss' 1899 ode to himself? So many notes, so little to say! Strauss may have been trapped in the militaristic, magniloquent culture of imperial Germany, with its pre-echoes of the Third Reich, but we're not. Why invest in its music?

Vänskä's account, noisy (nine horns!) but exacting, is not without rewards. Foremost among these is the brilliant playing of Erin Keefe, the orchestra's new concertmaster, in the expansive "role" of the hero's companion. One would have preferred a different vehicle, but Keefe's performance, technically immaculate and full of character, left not the slightest doubt as to the wisdom of her appointment.

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