

Jay Harvey Upstage

Saturday, September 15, 2018

High distinction at a late hour: Three finalists inaugurate IVCI romantic/modern concerto phase



Ioana Cristina Goicea: Mastery in Shostakovich.

My responses to the first night of finals Friday at Hilbert Circle Theatre followed a pattern established by how the same three International Violin Competition of Indianapolis participants struck me at the first night of Schrott Center for the Performing Arts presentations Wednesday.

I'm wary of being quick to confirm first impressions, and I've always been reluctant to pick favorites to win the quadrennial contest. For one thing, I heard less than half of the performances this year, so it would have been useless to have set up a bracket.

Wednesday's program offered an unavoidable basis for comparison: Richard Lin, Risa Hokamura, and **Ioana Cristina Goicea** all played Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5 in A major, K. 219. At that concert, Goicea overcame my tendency to be a little weary hearing the same piece a third time on the same evening. As I noted in my previous post, she found more personal meaning in the piece than the others, but without distorting anything.

On Friday, with guest conductor Leonard Slatkin on the podium leading the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, Goicea gave the most astonishing account of a core-repertoire concerto here in memory. I hesitate to proclaim my memory thorough enough to be certain of this, but I am struck by how completely she got to the essence of a difficult work.

At the beginning of last year, Zach De Pue, then ISO concertmaster, played the Shostakovich First on the regular season. The performance was moving, largely successful, and rich in evidence of deep commitment. I would set Goicea's distinctly above it.

"Nocturne: Moderato" opens the concerto with a special challenge: Can understated, slowly unfolding music grab and hold the attention as the first movement's unconventional structure is deliberately laid out? Goicea's playing was fully equal to giving a resoundingly positive answer. Her tone was steady, glowing but not too shiny. It seemed the perfect way to captivate the audience for the rigors to come.

The soloist gets to dig in with the arrival of the second-movement Scherzo. Goicea was incisive and in control, with pinpoint rhythmic articulation enabling the violin to hold its own against a busy accompaniment. On to one of Shostakovich's greatest achievements — the third-movement Passacaglia and Cadenza. The Russian composer often seems to me self-indulgent in his slow movements. This one combines formal and orchestral ingenuity in a manner that moves the whole work onto a high spiritual and aesthetic plane. There's no feeling of wallowing.

Slatkin's stature as a seasoned maestro came to the fore in maintaining balances throughout. The way English horn and bassoon come in to anchor the violinist's signature treatment of the passacaglia theme was spine-tingling. Goicea's solo cadenza was remarkably intense, yet imbued with a wide spectrum of color. The "Burlesque" finale worked out all the preceding "dark night of the soul" moods while retaining the notes of desperation and sardonic humor that lend a picaresque quality to Shostakovich's fast movements.

Everything fell into place; it was the kind of performance that made you feel privileged to be there. It was 10:30: A two-and-a-half-hour concert suddenly didn't seem too long. I don't like to talk of "definitive" performances of a piece of music; it makes any further performances by anyone seem superfluous. Let's call this one "essential," in that it represented so completely what this great work is all about.



Maestro Slatkin: Besides the centennial birthday boy, he's America's other superb conducting Leonard.

Elsewhere, we heard another exhibition of youthful ardor from **Risa Hokamura**, this time in Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D major, op. 35. I have to admit I can't do full justice to her achievement because the piece, like most of Tchaikovsky, no longer resonates with me. There were indications, not just because of her sigh of relief at the end, that the work tires her somewhat. I suspect, though, that further seasoning will make her revisiting of this repertoire staple more than satisfying to those who like Tchaikovsky more than I do.

As he had Wednesday, **Richard Lin** opened the concert with an appealing interpretation, technically self-assured and artistically valid — this time of Max Bruch's "Scottish Fantasy."

Orchestra and soloist established the nostalgic atmosphere immediately. Lin allowed the phrases limning each of the borrowed Scottish tunes to blossom. He handled slight ritards in the second movement adroitly and put a nice finish on it. He displayed good rapport with ISO principal harpist Diane Evans; the interaction was capped in the finale, which vividly presented the designated "warlike" (*guerriero*) profile before recalling the first-movement tune hauntingly.

Tonight the other three finalists will be heard from, and I will try to give the Tchaikovsky concerto its due. I never tire of the Mendelssohn, fortunately, and William Walton's concerto will be a pleasure rarely encountered in comparison to its companions on this much-anticipated program. Shortly afterward, the medalists (first, second, and third place) will be announced. Those prizes and a host of others will be presented Sunday evening at Scottish Rite Cathedral.