

BPO and guests deliver an unanticipated treasure

By Mary Kunz Goldman | *Published December 2, 2017*

This weekend's Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra concert turned out to be one of those sleeper hits.

On the program are three of classical music's known quantities – Ravel's "Le Tombeau de Couperin," Mendelssohn's much-played Violin Concerto, and Mozart's Symphony No. 41, the "Jupiter." The guest soloist is French violinist Arnaud Sussman, and the guest conductor is Andre Raphel, music director of the Wheeling Symphony Orchestra in West Virginia. Neither is a household name. There was nothing, on the surface, to set the town abuzz.

Still a big crowd, all ages, turned out. And wisely so.

I would have hated to have missed this concert.

Raphel was clearly in charge from the word go. You sensed it. And it wasn't just that he sported the traditional tails. He and the orchestra treated that Ravel with panache and technical precision. The dance rhythms sparkled and every note was right where it should be. From the balcony it was a delight to see the musicians echoing each other. It was a little like watching a dance.

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And speaking of dancing, Raphel was a bit of a dancer himself. His movements are very expressive and as a listener, you respond along with the orchestra.

Sussman, when he appeared for the Mendelssohn, complemented the conductor perfectly. The Mendelssohn sang.

Raphel and the orchestra ran a tight ship, and against that backdrop, Sussman played with accuracy and lightning-quick virtuosity. Feet planted apart, he leaned into the music. He radiated taut concentration. You could almost believe he was simply standing there with that quicksilver music just pouring through him.

When the color of the music changed, he would change position. Several times, thanks to Kleinhans Music Hall's acoustics, you could hear the soles of his shoes on the floor. Tap dancing, a friend joked at intermission. But it all increased the excitement. So much of this concerto depends on just the right staccato, just the right legato. Sussman carried it off brilliantly, and so did the orchestra musicians, individually and as a group. Raphel was able to handle the tempos in a way that built excitement. I have heard a lot of performances of this concerto, but none more enjoyable than this. The dynamic ending was followed by a long, standing ovation, and rightfully so. Bravi, tutti, as they say in the opera world. Magnificent, everyone.

Mozart's "Jupiter" followed intermission. It was too bad that the orchestra was pared back, even when done in the name of authenticity. No one would dream of cutting back an orchestra for Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and the "Jupiter" isn't far from that, chronologically or in spirit.

And after hearing Raphel conducting the work, I would like to see what he would do with this symphony given larger forces. As it was, he and the cut-back orchestra played the daylights out of the "Jupiter." They gave it drive and precision and might.

Raphel chose good tempos. The slow movement wasn't too fast. It was heartfelt. And the last movement wasn't too slow. The conductor's feeling showed overtly in his wide, evocative gestures. I imagine that people hearing this symphony for the first time would be able to keep their bearings just by watching him. I envy those people.

As in the Mendelssohn, Raphael could kick things up a notch when the music demanded. When the finale got around to that final fugue, you felt the excitement. It's like a fireworks display – one theme, then another, then another.

It must be a challenge for the musicians – it was sweet to hear them, before the concert, practicing the various themes. But it's an equal challenge for the audience. How do you get your mind around this? Raphael wound it up with a flourish and the audience cheered and cheered.

I have to say, I loved this audience. Like the musicians, the listeners were in the zone. There was tremendous silence and concentration throughout the concert, everyone in the hall breathing together, absorbing the music. It was a wonderful evening.

The concert repeats at 2:30 p.m. Dec. 3.