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Oregon Symphony performs Beethoven, Haydn, Bartok with clarity, elegance (review)

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A **week after opening** their classical subscription series with the mysterious tonal splendor of Toru Takemitsu and the cinematic excitement of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade," Carlos Kalmar and the **Oregon Symphony** returned for something completely different: a relaxed display of modest scale, clarity and elegance. The drama was all outside in the soaking storm, and the evening inside Schnitzer Hall was no less satisfying for that.

In fact, the concert's best moments were also its quietest, in Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto and Haydn's Symphony No. 64.

The second-movement Largo of the Beethoven is an extended solo for the pianist, like a sonata movement slipped into what is otherwise an orchestral work. In the hands of Jeffrey Kahane, it was unhurried, thoughtful and lyrical.

Throughout the concerto, Kahane seemed ideal both for the piece and for the collaboration with Kalmar and the orchestra. He's an understated presence on stage, with no theatrics or glowering intensity; his resemblance to the famously deadpan comedian Steven Wright only reinforces the low-key impression he gives.

He is also among the most undersung pianists on the solo circuit, a player with a fine touch and keen musical instincts. His trills and passagework were crystal clear, and even at his most virtuosic he gave the music a finesse and human scale to match Kalmar's restrained, detail-rich approach--he brought no thunder, but plenty of lightning.

The Largo of the Haydn, an odd, fragmentary movement punctuated by abundant pauses, was likewise beguilingly elegant and calm. With forces reduced almost to chamber-orchestra size, the Haydn unfolded like a little gem, with graceful, easy phrasing and precise attacks (the piece was being recorded for CD release, and Saturday's performance sounded like a very clean first take). A listener who hadn't heard the orchestra in many years would be surprised to see and hear how naturally the players take to the Viennese classical idiom now, with minimal direction from the podium.

Bracketing the Beethoven and Haydn were Béla Bartók's "Dance Suite" and Johann Strauss Jr.'s iconic "Tales from the Vienna Woods." The former was folksy, sprightly and colorful; the latter turned the Gemütlichkeit up to 11, with ever-so-slight delays of the third beat in every measure giving extra lilt to the waltz rhythm. Sure, it was classical comfort food with an added spoonful of schmaltz, but it was also just a fireplace and a hot toddy short of the perfect refuge on a foul night.

-- James McQuillen

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