

Art on My Sleeve

PERRY TANNENBAUM >>> Covers and Critiques the Performing Arts

Tag Archives: Jinjoo Cho

Jinjoo Cho and Joshua Gerson Make Impressive Belk Debuts

Review: Charlotte Symphony Plays Barber's Violin Concerto

By Perry Tannenbaum



March 25, 2022, Charlotte, NC – While Christopher Warren-Green's tenure as music director at Charlotte Symphony winds down, as he transitions to the roles of conductor laureate and artistic adviser in seasons to come, the appearances of guest conductors at Belk Theater and Knight Theater are gaining an extra aura, an extra sparkle of excitement. For this stately parade of baton-wielders can now be construed as a prolonged set of auditions as audiences, Symphony execs, and orchestra musicians make up their minds on who should follow in maestro Warren-Green's footsteps. Suddenly, everything going on behind the scenes at Symphony is freshly cloaked in intrigue.

Was the absence of Kwamé Ryan, listed on our own calendar as guest conductor, a last-minute indication that he is fielding offers elsewhere and withdrawing from candidacy? Was his replacement, Joshua Gerson from the New York Phil and the New World Symphony, a hot new prospect for our upcoming vacancy, or was Symphony's substitution based on Gerson's availability and preparedness for the planned program? With Jinjoo Cho slated to play Samuel Barber's Violin Concerto as the headline piece, Gerson's readiness needed to be on par with the musicians' for that work, since they had presumably mastered their parts sufficiently to greet Cho and Gerson at rehearsals when they arrived.

No notice of the substitution came our way via email, but changes weren't so last-minute that Symphony's program booklet couldn't be changed in time for Cho's Charlotte debut with Gerson. Digital brochures, thankfully, can be altered more nimbly than printed editions, the pre-pandemic norm. Impressively enough, Gerson was able to conduct the preamble to Cho's appearance, Errollyn Wallen's *Mighty River*, a 2007 British piece that certainly isn't standard rep. César Franck's Symphony in D minor, however, had to be jettisoned, replaced after intermission by Robert Schumann's "Rhenish" Symphony No. 3. Some of the answers about what was going on behind the scenes were answered – you have to pay attention, folks! – by the announcement of Symphony's 2022-23 season earlier in the week. Ryan resurfaces as one of the 10 guest conductors who will continue the pageant of candidates, and Franck's Symphony also resurfaces as part of next season's classics playlist, but they are no longer linked on the same program.

Subscribers who were not attuned to these program and performer shuffles probably didn't notice any significant glitches. I'd have to say that Symphony's musicians not only rose to the occasion but were energized by its challenges. If that didn't happen before they assembled on the Knight Theater stage, then Gerson's extended and enthusiastic introduction to the music could have provided the spark. As relaxed and genial as he was speaking to the audience, Gerson was as instantly intense when he faced away from us to his musicians.

Born in Belize in 1958, Wallen was commissioned to write a piece celebrating the bicentennial of the repeal of the Slave Trade Act. Since the British Parliament passed that landmark legislation on March 25, 1807, Charlotte Symphony's first performance of the piece was a celebration in itself, staged exactly 215 years later. Principal French hornist Byron Johns, played no small part in assuring that the debut was a success, playing the affecting "Amazing Grace" melody that frames Wallen's composition and often infuses it throughout. The title was Wallen's affirmation of the flow of history toward freedom, driven by the yearning and pursuit of all who respond to their human instincts and nature's law. Horns and strings wasted no time in percolating their evocations of that flow. Principal timpanist Jacob Lipham furnished the most distinctive landmarks along the way, with principal harpist Andrea Mumm Trammell adding vivid detail, supplemented by Erinn Frechette tweedling her piccolo. Wallen handed off solo honors to the oboe, flute, and other winds before handing it back to Johns, with principals Hollis Ulaky on the oboe and flutist Victor Wang making their colors count the most.

We've seen both Joshua Bell and Elmar Oliveira playing the Barber concerto here in Charlotte over the past 25 years, so to say that Cho's performance with Gerson eclipsed them both is no small claim. Head-to-head, Cho generated more electricity than Oliveira, and



behind the glamorous violinist, Gerson and the Charlotte Symphony got out of her way more deftly than the Houston Symphony and Christoph Eschenbach were able to manage in 1998. Cho was sublime in the opening Allegro and seemed to summon a special ardor

from Gerson and the orchestra in their response – I don't think we ever did get enough of the catchy main theme.

In the hushed Andante that followed, Cho may have been even more magical, more transported by the score. The concluding Presto in moto perpetuo, rewritten according to Gerson to provide a greater challenge to the soloist, seemed to become a new and spontaneous challenge that Cho and the orchestra hurled back at each other. There actually *was* a pause for the native Korean to gather herself as the ensemble rushed on. After a visible deep breath, Cho's fresh onslaught was even more fiery and swift.

The power of the Barber drove a fellow critic and his spouse to the back of the hall after intermission, but the Schumann proved worthy of staying for, not at all an anticlimax. The zest and drive of the opening *Lebhaft* of the “Rhenish” were unlike anything I’d heard in live



performances before – certainly better than *anything* on the complete set of Schumann symphonies by Roy Goodman and the Hanover Band, ballyhooed as the first complete recording on period instruments (and a complete RCA dud). No, you have to listen to the John Eliot Gardiner set on DGG, also on period instruments, to find an equal to the glories unfolded at Knight Theater by our Symphony.

Gerson didn’t *quite* achieve the lightning bolts you’ll hear from Gardiner in the opening movement, though he sustained a wondrous sense of expectancy in the relatively quieter section between the great pinnacles. The middle movements, culminating in the rich heraldry and solemnity of the penultimate *Feirlich* fourth movement, achieved parity with Gardiner’s benchmark recording for me. But it was the grand military *Lebhaft* finale where



Gerson and Symphony surpassed what was previously on record, establishing a new high-water mark for the "Rhenish."

© April 6, 2022 [<https://artonmysleeve.net/2022/04/06/jinjoo-cho-and-joshua-gerson-make-impressive-belk-debuts/>] 📁 Concert 📌 Andrea Mumm Trammell, Byron Johns, Erinn Frechette, Hollis Ulaky, Jacob Lipham, Jinjoo Cho, Joshua Gersen, Kwamé Ryan, Victor Wang