

Baltimore Symphony Orchestra

Music Center at Strathmore, Jan. 26 2020

Guest conductor John Storgårds of Finland
Shostakovich: Symphony No. 9
Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto, Gil Shaham, violin
Haydn: Symphony No. 103 "Drumroll"

Shostakovich: Symphony No. 9 in E-flat Major, op. 70

Unlike some of his other symphonies, this one from 1945 is in a lighter witty vein, not the grand epic that the Russian public expected to celebrate the victory over Nazi Germany. Stalin was not pleased. The orchestration is very interesting. Although written in a classic key signature (a rarity for a 20th C. work), it has definite chromatic elements and often dips into minor tonalities. There is much pizzicato from the strings, and many solo turns for clarinet, flute, oboe, piccolo and even bassoon, intermixed with heavier ensembles with lots of brass (4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones and a tuba). The percussion section includes timpani, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, triangle and tambourine, all heard to good effect. All in all, a magnificent work, wonderfully performed.

Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto in E minor, op. 64

This is one of my favorite violin concertos, right after Tchaikovsky's – in part because it dispenses with the orchestral exposition (some of these can be tedious) and has the violin enter at the second measure. Superstar Gil Shaham, brother of pianist Orli Shaham whom I heard the prior week, was the soloist here. He exhibited dazzling technique and impeccable intonation, but his sound just did not project well. Sometimes he could not be heard above the orchestra. And I was seated fairly close to the stage – first-level box just in front of the stage apron. Conductor Piotr Gajewski maintains that if the orchestra covers a soloist (vocal or instrumental), that is probably the conductor's fault. Afterwards, Shaham and conductor Storgårds (who is also a violinist) gave an encore of a violin duo whose name I did not catch.

Haydn: Symphony No. 102 in E-flat Major, "Drumroll"

This is the second-last of Haydn's symphonies, part of the "London Symphony" series, nos. 93 – 104. The drum plays a prominent part in the scoring, not only in the opening drumroll (which gives the symphony its name), but throughout all four movements. The drumrolls are played on timpani (kettle drums), not the snare drum usually associated with drumrolls in military bands. The timpanist (unidentified) gave a virtuoso performance. Storgårds did a marvelous job here, especially in the final movement. He crisply led the dramatic stops-and-starts, and smoothly transitioned from full-bore tuttis to quieter sections by violas, horns and winds.

This was an eclectic mix of modern, romantic and classical pieces that worked together very well.