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Orchestration glows with Russian coloring

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“Spanish Gold” (El Oro Español) was the theme of half of the New Mexico Philharmonic’s concert last Saturday. Works by Joaquin Rodrigo and Arturo Márquez accompanied the Petrushka Suite by Stravinsky.

In the very reverse of what has come to be conventional program order, the Philharmonic began with the large work Petrushka, then proceeded to the Concierto de Aranjuez and concluded with the Danzón No. 2, the shortest of the three works.

Petrushka is the second in the trilogy of great scores that Stravinsky composed for the Paris seasons of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes before the first World War. It tells the traditional Russian folk tale of the puppet who comes to life by means of a magic flute, falling in love with the puppet ballerina, only to be murdered by the puppet Moor.

Stravinsky had no qualms incorporating more than half a dozen popular tunes or folk melodies into the work, including the Easter “Song of the Volochebniki,” which opens the ballet. The music intersects Stravinsky’s Russian heritage and an emerging modernist style, both filtered through the lens of Parisian fin de siècle sensibilities.

Guest conductor Hélène Bouchez, whom we saw last season, led a pristine performance bristling with sharp and unexpected rhythms. The second scene became a mosaic of contrasting episodes. Finally Petrushka’s ghost appears and mocks us in two keys simultaneously, “a nose thumbing addressed to the audience,” in Stravinsky’s own words.

The orchestration glows with Russian coloring as well as Stravinsky’s delight in using heretofore untried combinations of instruments, or instruments playing in extreme ranges.

It’s almost unfair to recognize anyone particularly in this brilliant display of group playing, but pianist Conor Hanick, trumpeter John Marchiando and tuba player Richard White all made outstanding contributions.

Rodrigo’s Concierto de Aranjuez has long been the most popular of all concertos for guitar, in no small part due to the lovely central Adagio. It’s originality has often been ignored by those who mistake harmonic complexity for inventiveness.

Guitar versus orchestra. It’s not even close to a fair fight in terms of volume. Hence the orchestra must be handled with kid gloves by both composer and conductor.

Not surprisingly, guest performer Jason Vieaux used a mild amplification of his guitar in the spacious confines of Popejoy Auditorium, and Bouchez kept the orchestra, which can be boisterously loud as in Petrushka, at a comparable level. She had the orchestra dancing with color and rhythm, yet rarely overpowered the guitar.

The bright and breezy outer movements, balancing neo-classic elements with Romantic underpinnings, contrasted stunningly with the doleful Adagio. Vieaux, along with the plaintive song of a cor anglais (Melissa

Peña), gave a touching rendition of the Adagio, the most famous of the three movements. The solo cadenza, unusual in a slow movement, was given with natural fluency, idiomatic phrasing and superb technique.

Vieaux's encore was an Argentine song from his latest CD. The evening finished with Arturo Márquez's Danzón No. 2, a tuneful tonal work, though more in style with a Pops concert.

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