

Jason Vieaux

Performs the Rodrigo 'Aranjuez' concerto in Philadelphia
"This terrific guitarist...was a marvel."

Satisfying standards from Symphony in C

By Matthew Westphal, Philadelphia Inquirer

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CAMDEN - You don't hear concerts like this very often these days. The program that Symphony in C performed under music director Stilian Kirov on Saturday at Rutgers-Camden's Gordon Theater was the sort of thing you'd hear from the Boston Pops back in the 1970s but that major orchestras today tend to stay away from. That's too bad, because it made a satisfying evening.

Starting things off was Rodion Shchedrin's *Carmen Fantasy*, a suite he adapted from the Bizet opera for a ballet starring his wife, the great Bolshoi star Maya Plisetskaya. Mucking about with Bizet's score did not go down well with humorless Soviet bureaucrats, who banned the piece until Dmitri Shostakovich, the country's most prominent composer, personally intervened. Shchedrin's version, an inventive and witty homage, adds to a standard string orchestra a large array of cleverly deployed percussion instruments. Example: A four-note theme from Carmen's famous "Habanera" played on, of all things, chimes - winking at the listener with its sheer incongruity.

Under Kirov, every tempo felt natural, each mood was portrayed clearly, but there wasn't enough of the spark we'd have heard from his predecessor, Rossen Milanov. That problem vanished when Jason Vieaux came out to play.

This terrific guitarist, a Philadelphia favorite, worked wonders with Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*: in place of flamenco-fied fire, he played with elegance and fine-tuned precision. The fastest passages were distinct and clear; the subtlety with which he varied dynamics and timing from note to note was a marvel.

Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, which closed the concert, isn't a tribute to the 18th-century Couperin so much as a gaze backward to French Baroque convention as a way to honor friends who had died in World War I.

The music itself doesn't sound Baroque at all; it serves up the luscious instrumental colors and warm, slightly peppery harmonies we love Ravel for with a remarkable mix of sadness and good cheer.

In this well-considered performance, the prelude felt suffused with bright morning sunshine; the menuet bathed in the late afternoon light that photographers call "the golden hour"; the triple-time forlane had a quality of melancholy skipping, the final rigaudon an ebullient rush. The woodwind players outdid themselves.