

A superb take on Schumann

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Philadelphia Inquirer Music Critic
March 15, 2006

Few great composers wrote so many large works that are unknown to a broader public as Robert Schumann, and not necessarily because they're bad. The *Violin Concerto*, for example: It's a late-period piece written when the composer was racing against his encroaching insanity, and he created it with speed but not great consideration, leaving behind what's essentially a first draft.

Locked away until the 1930s (apparently, it was considered embarrassing), the *Violin Concerto* has been turning up with increasing frequency, though substantial figures from Wolfgang Sawallisch to Nikolaus Harnoncourt haven't succeeded in uncovering the worthwhile piece that seems lurking in the concerto's own orchestral underbrush.

Something close to the performance I've been waiting for arrived Monday at the Kimmel Center with violin soloist Jennifer Frautschi and the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia under Ignat Solzhenitsyn. The approach bordered on being radical, at least for Philadelphia, where interpretive problems have long been steamrolled by the Philadelphia Orchestra sound. This all-Schumann concert had winds and strings almost evenly matched in number, creating a hugely different sound envelope, closer to one that the composer might recognize.

Many previously unheard musical contours emerged from passages of the concerto that previously seemed amorphous. That was even truer of the *Manfred Overture*, which in fact seemed like a piece for wind band with strings softening the edges.

Continuity is a problem in both works, since Schumann tried to get too much mileage out of less-than-great thematic material. Yet so many tiny dissonances emerged from the wind writing in both works that my ear never fell into the usual I've-heard-this-already torpor. And while soloist Frautschi was important for inflecting the solo lines of the *Violin Concerto* with an authoritative sense of speculation on what Schumann was going for, Solzhenitsyn needs to be applauded for his canny strategic decisions.

The overlong, potentially tiresome final movement, for example, was given a slowish minuet-style tempo, but with marchlike accents. This not only worked, it had a personality unlike anything else in Schumann, suggesting that the piece is more than just an echo of better creative times. No special ministrations were needed for the *Symphony No. 1 (Spring)*. The taut, vital performance it received from Solzhenitsyn & Co. felt like an exhilarating reward for the tough but satisfying work accomplished in the first half. Orchestral balances can be a problem even in Schumann's best works, though not with this contingent of 17 winds and 19 strings. The strings could have lost their allure and presence but didn't, thanks to a warmth of tone that's heard with increasing consistency with this group.