



USC Symphony Orchestra Closes Season with American Debut of Guitar Concerto

By David Lowry
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The 2012-2013 season of the University of South Carolina Symphony Orchestra closed on April 25 at the Koger Center with Professor Donald Portnoy conducting.

The opening piece was Bedrich Smetana's 1879 work, The Moldau. Named for the river running through the composer's native Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), The Moldau possesses a popular rank among classical orchestral pieces. Nonetheless, there are lots of moments to rate its value as a little tawdry. Programming music that sounds like water flowing is never easy and can become murky. Curiously, this work ends with nearly as many measures of the same chord as the beginning of Wagner's 1869 Das Rheingold, which sustains an E-flat major chord for four minutes in its allusion to the motion of the Rhine River. Perhaps Wagner wins the effort. The lesson for university students is nevertheless extraordinarily valuable.

What set this concert apart — making it a genuine international event — was not Smetana, however, but rather the United States premiere of Concerto for Two Guitars by Brazilian composer Paulo Bellinati, who was present. Performing the concerto was the Brasil Guitar Duo, João Luiz and Douglas Lora. The work was premiered by the Orquestra Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo in June 2012, with the Brasil Guitar Duo.

The music itself is attractive while not being particularly contemporary. A few spicy harmonic idioms are present, but mainly it reflects a number of Brazilian traditions, all of which are enticing. The final movement took off with great rhythmic interest and alluring use of the two guitars. The concerto wisely assigns thematic and developmental aspects to the

guitar duo alone with the orchestra alternating. The guitars were discretely amplified, which certainly helped the orchestra hear what was going on, and kept a delicate balance for the audience. It's nice when modern technology can be used discretely.

It was immediately and consistently evident that the Brasil Guitar Duo works at a high level of musical achievement. Every aspect of their playing was magnificent.

The program's crowning work for the orchestra was Pini di Roma (The Pines of Rome), another piece of program music, but from the pen of a great composer, Ottorino Respighi. He is not only well known as a composer but also a brilliant orchestrator. For every one of the 80-plus students on stage, the lesson on what fine orchestration is all about was a superb experience. The demands include a trumpet having to go off-stage to play a solo, which was done stunningly well; a remote brass choir playing with panache and great ensemble from the Grand Tier; and several important solo passages from various orchestra members, who contributed to a richly vibrant performance.

The USC Symphony's level of excellence is competitive with many academic and professional orchestras. The reason is that the faculty for each of the School of Music's instrumental departments is first-rate and continues to attract fine talent from, literally, around the world. But the crux of the success is that Donald Portnoy has the wisdom and experience to lead the players into the highest ranks. South Carolina's investment in these young artists can only reap large economic and cultural rewards. We are grateful