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CLASSICAL REVIEW: Boston Symphony Orchestra navigates Mozart, Bruckner

An unlikely pairing get along well thanks to conductor Andris Nelsons and the orchestra.

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Andris Nelsons conducts the Boston Symphony Orchestra on Thursday.



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Andris Nelsons conducts the Boston Symphony Orchestra on Thursday.

By Keith Powers

For The Patriot Ledger

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It would be hard to imagine two more dissimilar stylists than Mozart and Bruckner. The first, a fountain of ideas, continually flowing; the latter, slowly bringing musical notions to a boil.

Under Andris Nelsons' direction, the Boston Symphony Orchestra rewarded both composers with insightful attention Thursday evening at Symphony Hall.

Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante for Violin, Viola and Orchestra gushes with enthusiasm. The title hearkens back to the earliest form of the concerto, when the division between soloists and ensemble was not as sharply delineated.

BSO concertmaster Malcolm Lowe and principal viola Steven Ansell stood before

their orchestra mates. While they did play along with the ensemble at times, Mozart provides them with substantial solo and duet forays.

The composer has the viola tuned up a half-step on all four strings, brightening the sound-world of the largely string orchestra. The first movement showed sparkle and wit, highlighted by its cadenza: first a canon, then shifting to a dramatic

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unison section, shifting again to a richly harmonized melody, then trilling its way back to the orchestra – all in one minute.

The slow middle movement veered into a surprisingly dark mood, the two soloists trading lines. Ansell drew out particularly intriguing harmonies. The finale quickly got rid of that darkness, reveling in its interplay.

Nelsons was at his most reserved and deferential, leading two of his most distinguished colleagues. As is always the case when orchestra members take solo turns, Ansell and Lowe were supported onstage with alert accompaniment, and warmly received by the Symphony Hall audience. Applause broke out at the end of each movement.

The convoluted story of the compositional history of Bruckner's Third Symphony wearies the mind. The composer's constant self-doubt, and his vulnerability to comments from friends and the reception of audiences, led him to multiple revisions. There are several legitimate scores to choose from for this symphony.

Nelsons chose the last, a version first performed in 1889. Its opening movement introduces two themes, gradually. The first, with broad interplay between horns and winds; the second, four descending notes, initially articulated in the strings.





The two musical themes get explored with rare persistence. Frequent crescendos build and break the tension – after one such break, a stark flute solo (principal Elizabeth Rowe), stood out.





The two principal ideas never disappear entirely. Nelsons, who has spoken about bringing Bruckner's infrequently played symphonies more regularly into the BSO repertory, worked hard to articulate phrases and development. It was particularly interesting, and carefully considered, conducting, challenged greatly in the slow adagio.

That second movement stays centered on one of the themes, colored by different orchestra sections at times, placed over shifting rhythms. An organic, integrated feeling for the movement was hard to maintain, the usual notion of an inspired slow movement overworked by the composer.

The scherzo waltzes its way through, changing the atmosphere, the outer sections noisy and rustic, the middle trio more tuneful and spry. This Nelsons communicated easily, his manner relaxed, the orchestra flowing.

The opening of the finale wears its Wagnerian influences openly – Bruckner

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obsequiously referred to that composer as “Master.” This movement continued the gambit: a small set of musical ideas, forcefully explored, sometimes with much elegance, sometimes not.

Nelsons knitted the various strands of the finale into a coherent shape. Bruckner does well to have such an enthusiast.



BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA Andris Nelsons conducts Mozart and Bruckner, featuring BSO musicians Malcolm Lowe, violin, and Steven Ansell, viola; Thursday night and again Friday, Saturday and Tuesday at Symphony Hall, 301 Massachusetts Ave., Boston; \$33-\$119. 888-266-1200; bso.org.

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