

Brassy personality: Brookline's Toby Oft is BSO's principal trombonist

Thursday

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By Keith Powers, Daily News Correspondent

You hear them clearly enough, but even the most avid symphony-goer would have a hard time recognizing them. While the brass instruments might be the loudest in the orchestra, the players who sit at the back of the stage, tucked away behind dozens of violinists, violists and cellists, rarely see the spotlight.

That changes during the Boston Symphony Orchestra's first concert of the new year, when the brass and horn players - along with some winds - get a chance to solo. In a program that includes rarely heard concertos by Rota, Jolivet, Krommer, Vivaldi and Schumann, the players who bring you those rousing fanfares and blasts from the farthest corners of the stage will stand front and center to show their stuff.

Principal trombonist Toby Oft is one of them, soloing in Nino Rota's expressive concerto, which swings from melodic to comic to introspective in its fifteen or so minutes. Rota, best known as a film composer ("The Godfather," "Romeo and Juliet," many films by Fellini, Wertmüller, Zeffirelli), "writes music you can grab onto right away," Oft says. "He puts a lot of pressure on the soloist that way.

"His voice is compelling," he says. "Everyone remembers his themes from 'Romeo and Juliet,' or 'The Godfather.' He's a film composer of substance, one you associate with the drama of an event."

So why is it that we rarely see the trombone, or french horn, or trumpet at the front of the stage? "A variety of reasons," Oft says. "The trombone is right in the range of the speaking voice, from high to low. But it's the upper voices that really electrify the hairs on the your back, so to speak. The trumpet gets lots of solos, but it's the higher pitches and brighter timbres - the oboe, the violins - that have the most music written for them.

"A lot of it has to do with tradition," he says. "For hundreds of years composers have looked at what their fathers and their father's fathers wrote-and that was string quartets, piano concertos.

"There was a time, back in the 17th century, when the trombone was featured a lot, mostly associated with the church," he says. "I wish there were more solo parts. With modern music we may have more of a shot - I played Gunther Schuller's trombone concerto a few years ago with the Army band, and it was terrific."

Other rarities on the program, which will be conducted by Ken-David Masur, include Vivaldi's Piccolo Concerto (Cynthia Meyers, soloist), Krommer's Concerto for Two Clarinets (William R. Hudgins, Michael Wayne), Jolivet's Concertino featuring principal trumpet Thomas Rolfs, and Schumann's Concert Piece for Four Horns, with soloists James Sommerville, Michael Winter, Rachel Childers, and Jason Snider.

Oft, who lives in Brookline, joined the BSO in 2008, appointed as principal chair by maestro James Levine. Levine's tenure at the BSO was shortened by illness and injury, but Oft has deeply fond memories of his former music director.

"He was one of my favorite conductors to work with," he says. "I love Andris Nelsons - don't get me wrong. In a way both Levine and Nelsons have a childlike glee, a selflessness about the music. Some conductors make it about themselves, but it's inspiring the way they both make it about the music.

"Life happens," Oft says about the Levine tenure. "You end up being grateful for whatever you get. When I would talk with Jimmy, and talking now with Nelsons, my jaw hits the floor sometimes when they get swept up in the small details. It's an inspiring perspective."

It takes a lot of hard work even to become a BSO musician, and the work doesn't stop there. "We have some of the best players in the world," Oft says. "And we keep working, keep discussing. Things like rhythm and pitch and blend, and artistic vision. We never stop talking.

"To the credit of my colleagues, these discussions are often heated, but it always includes making room to disagree. We show up prepared, and then have to be flexible. And we always make extra time for meetings, or to listen to broadcasts of performances to see how close we got to our ideas. Then try to get closer the next day. Every performance is an evolutionary experience."

And in this performance, Oft gets to bring some of those ideas to the front of the stage. The Rota concerto is just one of the suggestions he made for this program, but to hear him describe it, it's a great choice.

"The last movement is like a victory lap," he says. "When it's over, you won't forget the melody. It's like a shared remembrance with a friend, or a delightful meal when the waiter keeps bringing you out something new and you never get full."

"It's my job to make everyone see that the trombone can deliver an electrifying performance. I want people to say, 'I didn't think the trombone could do that.' "

Boston Symphony Orchestra

WHEN: Jan. 5-7

WHERE: Symphony Hall, 300 Mass. Ave., Boston

TICKETS: \$30-\$104

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