

Pianist Gabriela Martinez shines with the Akron Symphony (Jan. 20)

by Mike Telin



While Sergei Prokofiev's third piano concerto receives more than its fair share of visits to the concert stage, and even his first concerto makes appearances from time to time, what about the composer's second concerto — why does it languish in obscurity?

On Saturday, January 20 at E.J. Thomas Hall, guest conductor Daniel Hege led the first-rate Akron Symphony in a riveting performance of Prokofiev's visceral *Piano Concerto No. 2 in g*, with the

brilliant Gabriela Martinez as soloist. The young Venezuelan pianist was effortless in her handling of the 30-minute concerto's technically challenging writing. But it was her instinctive music-making that made for a thrilling listening experience.

Martinez was relaxed and confident during the opening of the Andantino, full of flair during the faster middle section. She was dazzling in Scherzo: Vivace — seamlessly alternating between legato and staccato articulations. The movement is a test of endurance for the soloist and Martinez was more than up to the challenge. She took a controlled approach to the Moderato, with its plodding bass ostinato in the orchestra, while adding the appropriate amount of cheekiness in the solo passages. The pianist was quick out of the blocks for the Finale: Allegro tempestoso. Never looking back, Martinez raced to the end in style.

Hege led a tight performance that allowed the ASO and soloist to act as a synchronized team. It's always a pleasure to discover new performers, and hopefully we will be able to hear Gabriela Martinez again soon.

In keeping with the “seconds” theme of the evening, Hege dedicated the second half of the concert to Brahms’ *Symphony No. 2 in D*. A gentle, sunny work that is often compared to Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony, its opening Allegro non troppo gradually draws listeners in. Hege took the composer’s tempo markings to heart, setting a relaxed pace and coaxing a lush, warm sound from the orchestra. The cellos were splendid as they introduced the famous lullaby.

Hege paid close attention to balances and detail during the Adagio non troppo, allowing many lovely solo lines to be clearly heard. Principal horn Meghan Guegold performed her solos with panache. Hege painted that Beethovenian “Pastoral” scene during the Allegretto grazioso — the winds were terrific throughout. The concluding Allegro con spirito was majestic, the full-sounding brass never overpowering their colleagues.

The concert opened with Brahms’ charming *Hungarian Dances* Nos. 1 and 5. Hege led performances that were crisp, energetic, and full of Hungarian passion.

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