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SYMPHONY REVIEW

## Conductor has symphony in fine form after break our take

# JoAnn Falletta guides a masterful performance that plays to her strengths.

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The Virginia Symphony was in excellent form at its concert Saturday evening, seemingly glad to be back at work after its holiday hiatus. JoAnn Falletta led a program that offered a great deal of musical enjoyment and played to her interpretive strengths.

Falletta collaborated with pianist Norman Krieger in the evening's main work, the towering Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-Flat Major, Op. 83 by Johannes Brahms. This piece stands out as the great 19th-century Romantic concerto, a symphony in all but name. A musical statement of profound complexity and richness, the Brahms Second demands more than just technical display. The soloist has to have technical skill at a near-superhuman level. At the same time, the piano is truly on an equal footing with the orchestra, and the conductor has to balance all these various parts into a convincing whole.

Few performances meet all the demands of this mighty work, but Krieger, Falletta and company came very close Saturday evening. From the deceptively simple opening dialogue between piano and horn to the dancelike finale, Krieger was a master builder, scaling his tone back when necessary, providing a deep, plush tone in the piano's lower octaves, and managing Brahms' complicated writing with seeming ease. His playing encompassed both urgency and patience, an ideal combination for this work.

A particular highlight was the lyrical third movement, where Krieger and cellist Michael Daniels played as if time stood still, Daniels' cello solos poised between restraint and emotion. In the finale, Falletta and Krieger caught the kinship to some of Brahms' Hungarian dances, and the orchestra supplied the requisite lilt and sparkle. In fact, the only downside to the performance was the often sour-toned contributions of the horns.

Falletta showed her skills at program-building by following the Brahms with two lesser but highly enjoyable works. Nikolai Tchaikovsky's "La Princesse lointaine" is a brief entr'acte to a play by Rostand, and inhabits a post-Tchaikovsky world of lush harmonies and sumptuous melodies. The strings in particular appeared to have a great time with their long and lyrical lines, and the orchestra provided a lovely rendition of this rarely heard work.

Richard Strauss' "Symphonic Fragment from Josephs-legende" is another rarity. Culled from a fulllength ballet, it tells the Biblical story of Joseph and the Potiphar's wife. Strauss once again demonstrated his orchestral wizardry in

this work, going from subtle exoticism to roof-shaking climaxes. There were also fleeting echoes of other Strauss works, but it was all a lot of fun. Falletta and her orchestra outdid themselves in putting over the work, making a strong case for the composer as a master alchemist who could turn even banal materials into gold.

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