

The BPO celebrates Mendelssohn with melodiously captivating piece

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This weekend's Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra concerts observe the bicentenary of the birth of Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847).

Of all the great composers, none led a more charmed life than Mendelssohn. He was born into a family of affluence and power, his obvious talent was fully encouraged, and artistic success seemingly came without effort. He died at age 38, leaving a legacy of compositions whose elegance, poetic expressiveness and craftsmanship are unsurpassed, lacking only an ability to grapple with true profundity.

It's fitting that his 1844 Violin Concerto, the last and arguably most melodiously captivating of his orchestral works, was the centerpiece of the program, given a superbly rapt and expressive performance by violinist Robert McDuffie, guest conductor Alvaro Cassuto and the BPO.

McDuffie is one of the finest violinists of our age. He played with great clarity and precision, but without sacrificing anything in expression or musicality. His performance did not so much call attention to itself as to the crystalline beauty and conception of Mendelssohn's music. This was nowhere more evident than in the cadenza, where his obvious affection, intensity and virtuosity were a perfect extension of the spirit of the first movement.

The Andante was marked by an exquisite tenderness that never slipped into sentimentality, and in the sprightly, athletic Finale, McDuffie's dazzling performance and control of the difficult spiccato passages were absolutely breathtaking. Under Cassuto, the orchestra was forceful and assertive on its own but excellently balanced in support of the soloist.

In response to a well-deserved standing ovation, McDuffie played the quietly searching Sarabande from Bach's Partita No. 1. Magnificent!

The concert opened with the 1832 "Fingal's Cave," a seascape almost perfect in its evocation of pulsing waves approaching the famous cave in Scotland's Hebrides Islands. The two main themes complement each other in presenting aspects of the ceaseless undulation and swelling of the sea, and Cassuto's interpretation caught every nuance of this mini-masterpiece.

The conductor's most revealing work, however, was in the concluding Symphony No. 5, called "Reformation" because of its commemoration of the 1530 Lutheran Augsburg Confession and its quotation of both the "Dresden Amen" and the famous "Ein feste Burg" chorale.

If Mendelssohn's art is lacking only in profundity, this symphony might be considered his reaching out in that direction. The result, while not exactly profound, did provide a sense of drama in his use of religious themes.

In some performances, the music can seem episodic and disjointed, but Cassuto avoided this by emphasizing the long legato lines, not only in the opening Andante, but also in the sprightly Scherzo. He infused this music with a brightness that kept its lightness from seeming out of context.

A devout concentration was drawn from the brief third movement, leading to a clearly articulated and superbly developed unfolding of the "Ein feste Burg" (A Mighty Fortress) chorale as a satisfying symphonic Finale.

Cassuto is obviously very fond of this music and kept the composer's penchant for spontaneity vitally alive so that all the elements of the symphony fit together well.