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The Wilmington Symphony – orchestra and soloist excel

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The Wilmington Symphony played the second concert of its regular 2025-26 subscription series to great success. The “new era” inaugurated in September with the arrival of Dr. Peter Askim as music director is bearing fruit, even after such a short time.

The program opened with the Overture in C by Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel. This greatly talented composer has been heard a good deal in recent years as the works of previously unnoticed female composers have been deservedly brought to performance. Mendelssohn-Hensel has had the additional hurdle of being overshadowed by her hugely popular younger brother Felix, who in his lifetime was a composer, pianist, and conductor of European stature and whose music has long been in the standard repertory. He was more than popular enough for his unpublished pieces to be considered in danger from the Nazis, who were systematically seizing and destroying works by Jewish authors and composers. The manuscripts were hidden by benefactors in a succession of places and were thereby saved.

Mendelssohn-Hensel’s works may not have been in danger of that, as she was largely unknown as a composer. Little of her output was published in her lifetime. However, it was large: over 100 piano pieces, over 200 Lieder, and a number of chamber pieces. Her piano set *Das Jahr*, pictorializing each month of the year in the best poetic romantic-era fashion, is a substantial work deserving of regular performance. It showcased a new concept for the time and was composed several decades before Tchaikovsky’s *The Seasons*, still today the better-known of the two.

The overture played on this concert is her only known full-sized orchestral work. It took, remarkably, until the end of the 20th century for it to be found in the Mendelssohn archive. We have the renowned conductor JoAnn Falletta to thank for the fact that it has now been edited for performance and recorded. Multiple orchestras have played it.

The piece is almost operatic in its play of instruments. A warm expressive beginning opens out into an impetuous, energized main allegro section. It is sparkling and appealing and deserving of regular performance. We are fortunate to be able to experience this piece that waited 150 years to be discovered.

Dvorak's glorious 8th symphony concluded the program. The orchestra showed its growing strength as an ensemble here. The performance was filled with long lined lyricism, subtle rubato, and artful transitions. Climaxes were effective and the strings soared. A transformational development in the calibre of the orchestra's playing is unfolding. It won deservedly strong approbation from the audience.

The centerpiece of the concert was the Viola Concerto by Christian Colberg. If the standard picture of a violist is someone with a reserved musical profile creating inner lines, of course at times with great skill, still - it is time for a change. Welcome Christian Colberg and Paul Aguilar!

The tremendously gifted Colberg is the principal violist of the Cincinnati Symphony. He is also a prolific composer, going well beyond the viola. He has written pieces with percussion ensemble in which he performs all the parts on the recording. He has been dedicated to music since the age of four, when he heard a recording of Ravi Shankar playing the sitar and resolved that he wanted to play it too. However, as there was probably not a single sitar to be had in his native Puerto Rico at the time, he dedicated himself instead to the violin from that point forward. Prizes and mastery of the viola followed and as they say, the rest is history.

The likewise hugely gifted Paul Aguilar is a soloist and chamber musician with a national and international presence and the winner of prizes in numerous competitions. He is a member of the Houston Symphony. Like the composer, he is both a violist and a violinist. As we met him here, he is a viola virtuoso. (We can assume this to be the case for Colberg as well, who has performed this concerto himself numerous times with various orchestras). The piece is large-scale, at 30 minutes, and with its technical challenges and musical breadth, may be poised to take its own place among the few repertory pieces now existing in the genre.

In a sense, the presentation of the piece began even before the music did. Aguilar entered the stage wearing a red shirt, an unusual sartorial choice for a concert, perhaps suggesting the flamboyance of his performance to come. The piece opens with a vigorous 2-note motive which, heard also in a 1-note form and with various melodic extensions, is key material in the movement. The viola is present right from the beginning and Aguilar promptly showed flair and the appearance of consummate ease in the technical passages. This built to something of a

virtuoso climax in a solo viola segment a bit past the midpoint of the movement. Aguilar presented himself here as something of a showman, flaunting his impressive capabilities in the best sense.

Throughout, the piece oscillates between technique and broad lyricism. Aguilar brought rich tone to the long lines, allowing the listener to bathe in expressivity.

The piece is essentially tonal, though sometimes with splashes of dissonance. There are passages of a pronounced Spanish character. This is not a coincidence. The concerto could have been subtitled “Three Character Sketches from Don Quixote”. The movement names are Alonso, Aldonza, and Sancho. Alonso is who Don Quixote was before re-creating himself as a heroic knight – in a remarkable psychological self-transformation that has echoed through the past four centuries of world literature and folklore. (The English word quixotic comes from his name.) Aldonza is the real woman who became Dulcinea, Quixote’s chivalric love. And Sancho is Quixote’s sideman through his adventures. Quixote also renamed his horse, but the concerto is focused on the human protagonists. The closest we come to the animal characters is a giggle-worthy evocation of Sancho’s donkey at the start of the 3rd movement.

The first movement, depicting the lead character, is the most expansive – nearly the length of the other two movements combined. At the ending to this large-scale virtuoso-lyric essay comes Colberg’s evocation of Alonso’s transformation from a cultivated gentleman to knight errant. The last minute of the movement pictures this change. It is effective. Beginning with strong drumbeats, the orchestra carries this depiction, supported by the viola. Phantasmagorical sounds evoke a world turned weirdly out of focus. Opera lovers may be reminded of Mime’s Fire Music nightmare in Wagner’s *Siegfried*. The last two chords are those of the beginning, framing the movement in this key idea. Here, however, as suggested by the composer, it could be the last hold Alonso has on who he was. The deed is done. He is now Don Quixote.

The orchestra carried this movement with tight rhythm and supported the lyricism of the viola with fine phrasing of its own. A memorable lyric moment was around the mid-point of the first movement, a dolorous viola solo over a gloomy bass pedal in the orchestra.

The lovely second movement is like a rhapsody for viola. Slow and atmospheric, it held a beautiful lead-in to the entrance of the soloist, a Spanish-style melody over another deep pedal point. In fact, there were two such beautiful moments. “It had to be Spanish,” the composer might tell us concerning this melody. Aldonza was “a Spanish women through and through” it

says in the program notes. Aguilar excelled in the long melodies here, which in this listener's ears, given their expressivity, might have portrayed the idealized Dulcinea too.

The third movement is a dance-like romp packed with irregular rhythms. The composer clearly sees Sancho as a fun guy. Not surprisingly, there is an appealing lyrical section too. Overall, the movement is difficult, with Aguilar's virtuosity on full display. And that of the orchestra too – this may be the fastest this writer has ever heard the Wilmington Symphony play.

After that exciting conclusion, cheered by the audience, Aguilar played an encore: "Obsession" from one of the Op. 27 solo violin sonatas by the famous virtuoso Eugène Ysaye. Something of a mashup of Bach, solo display, and the medieval Dies Irae, the piece showcased Aguilar's high skill and versatility.

There was so much to appreciate in this ending of the first half of the concert: a fine composer probably unfamiliar to many, his potentially important new work (premiered in 2018), a seemingly fearless soloist of top-level artistry (did I mention that he played the concerto from memory?), and the Wilmington Symphony in its own evolution as an ensemble. Framed by the significance of Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel's overture and the manifold beauties of the Dvorak, this was a performance to savor.