

The New Criterion

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Ending the Palm Beach season

by Paul du Quenoy

The Palm Beach Symphony closed out its forty-seventh season on May 22 with a concert of Ravel and Brahms featuring the Georgian piano soloist Alexander Toradze. Steeped in the international Romantic tradition, Toradze approached Ravel's Piano Concerto in G major, part of the composer's foray into multi-movement orchestral works, with a sparkling combination of wit and grace, ending the introductory *Allegrement* movement with a raised hand and faux-serious inquiry to the audience, "Was it any good?"

Ravel never got around to writing a symphony—this Concerto in G premiered in 1931, just six years before his death. Its more dissonant elements, likely inspired by the jazz bands Ravel heard when he toured America in 1928, rolled off Toradze's hands gorgeously, reminding us how important jazz influences were to classical composers in this era. Toradze's playing danced off each note with ebullience but with a clarity of purpose that confounded any temptation to reduce the score to insouciance.

The G-major piano concerto demonstrates Ravel's gift for orchestral color, but so, too, did the concert's opening piece, his *Suite of Five Pieces from Ma Mère l'Oye* (1911). Derived from Charles Perrault's seventeenth-century *Tales of Mother Goose* and other fables, Ravel's *Five Pieces* was conceived as simple piano duets for the children of a Polish family he often visited, and they were first performed by Jeanne Lelu and Geneviève Durony, who were just children at the time. *Five Pieces* was eventually orchestrated and staged as a ballet-divertissement, commissioned and directed by Jacques Rouché, a theatrical impresario who served for some thirty-two years as the director of the Paris Opera. Performing a pavane on the subject of Sleeping Beauty and a waltz for Beauty and the Beast, as well as other movements depicting characters such as Tom Thumb and Laideronnette, the Palm Beach Orchestra acquitted itself beautifully under the baton of Gerard Schwarz.

Schwarz's precision closed the season elegantly in the concert's second half, devoted exclusively to Brahms's Serenade No. 1 in D major (1858). A product of the composer's pre-symphonic years, it emerged during a period when he abandoned publishing serious compositions following the death of his mentor Robert Schumann. Originally written as a nonet, a revision gave us the larger

orchestral piece we know today. Scored in six movements, its bucolic tone leaves the impression of a path not often taken in the composer's four monumental symphonies. At the serenade's premiere, Brahms, aged just twenty-six and unsure of his talent, was convinced that it would flop, only to find that he had scored a major success. Schwarz's definitive reading benefited especially from his ensemble's majestic horn section, which carried Brahms's lavish scoring for the instrument in the first and fifth movements. The dance rhythms of the serenade's dual minuet movement rolled out well enough that one could forget that in their absence the piece forms a more traditional and composite symphony.

The Palm Beach Symphony resounded with a golden sound that rates it among the finest of American orchestras. Next year's symphony season will open on November 7, 2021—earlier than ever before—as the Palm Beach cultural calendar expands into what will likely be a year-round schedule. Everyone interested in serious music should take note of this rising orchestra.

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