

## What Dvořák Knew

Review of November 7, 2009 concert

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On reading the score of [Antonín Dvořák](#)'s magnificent Cello Concerto in B Minor, Op. 104, his mentor Brahms is reputed to have said, "Why on earth didn't I know that one could write a cello concerto like this? If I had only known, I would have written one long ago!"

What Dvořák knew was that the cello could be a soaring solo instrument, on a par with the violin, if placed in the proper orchestral context. With its low register, a solo cello is often in danger of being drowned out by all those piercing fiddles; but if the orchestra is held at bay, the cello can truly shine.

This solution for cello concertos was on full display Saturday at the Santa Rosa Symphony concert, where soloist Julie Albers joined the symphony under Music Director Bruno Ferrandis for a riveting performance of the Dvořák concerto. Despite the infamous acoustics of the Wells Fargo Center in Santa Rosa, Albers managed to project her sound not only above the orchestra, but also to the farthest reaches of the balcony.

Ferrandis set the stage for Albers with a dainty yet sure-handed performance of the Prelude to *Rusalka*, the only Dvořák opera in the standard repertory. This late work, composed after the composer's return to Bohemia from America, centers on water nymphs, and the music is accordingly gossamer-thin and delicate. Lightness was the order of the day, and Ferrandis spent most of his time with his fingers to his lips and his hands held up as if calming traffic. His efforts paid off, producing a shimmering though all too brief performance that made me want to hear the rest of the opera.

Instead of a water nymph, Julie Albers then strode on the stage, looking quite land-based in a strapless brown gown, with matching long brown hair. Her subdued ensemble set off her slender yet muscular arms and fingers to dramatic effect. And when she sat down, those arms and fingers soon became the center of attention, playing her chosen instrument with consummate artistry and skill.

## Scaling the Heights

Mastery is a given for world-class soloists, but it never ceases to amaze lesser mortals how someone can play an instrument to such perfection, with every note in time and in tune, every phrase fully articulated, every dynamic precisely controlled. If I'd known one could play a cello like Albers, I would have taken it up long ago.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Albers' playing was her intonation and confidence in the cello's upper register. With her left arm extended over her instrument, her digits positively danced at the end of the fingerboard, landing right in the center of each note. She had a fabulous glissando, impeccable double stops, and the trill of a hummingbird.

As Albers developed the majestic theme of the opening movement, Ferrandis kept the orchestra in check, repeatedly beseeching them to be quiet and let the cello radiate outward. This strategy continued in the quiet middle movement, where the balance is even trickier. Albers' solo here was luminous and expressive, evoking a tranquil pastoral scene complete with chirping birds from the woodwinds.

Albers began the final movement with a strong statement of the theme, played with real rhythmic flourish. Her runs were dazzling, but she continued to shine above all in the quiet passages, which were positively serene. Ferrandis and the orchestra matched her note for note, making for a memorable performance of a true masterpiece.

The masterpieces continued in the second half, given over to Dvořák's Symphony No. 9, "From the New World." That world is usually identified as America, where the composer wrote both the symphony and the cello concerto, though the ambiguity of the title suggests many other possibilities. The only certain conclusion is that this particular symphony is forever new, as refreshing on the hundredth hearing as on the first.

## Meeting the "Standards" Challenge

Performing standard repertory is a challenge for conductors who want to leave their mark on the music. Some change the tempos, bring out certain voices, even fiddle with the score. Ferrandis, however, played it straight, deciding only to invest the work with as much energy and happiness as possible. His horses were already at full gallop when they left the barn in the first movement, and he spurred them onward by literally jumping up and down on the podium.

The famous English horn solo at the outset of the second movement, played here by Laura Reynolds, transformed velocity into sweetness, and the subsequent playing throughout the orchestra was suffused with melody and strong dynamic contrasts. The last two movements resumed the energy of the first, reaching a high point with a terrific brass entry at the beginning of the fourth.

The performance was both self-effacing and triumphant. Through his diligent efforts, Ferrandis made clear what a great piece of music the "New World" symphony is, and his talented musicians gave a performance to match his vision.

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