

## Letter V

THE VIRGINIA CLASSICAL MUSIC BLOG

by Clarke Bustard

# Review: Richmond Symphony

**Valentina Peleggi conducting**

**with Paul Neubauer, viola**

**Oct. 21-22, Carpenter Theatre, Dominion Energy Center**

Nearly 80 years after his death, Béla Bartók still gives more than a few classical concertgoers a case of pre-emptive willies, thanks to his music's tendencies toward the gnarly, with a harmonic language that sounds at times acidic, at times spacey, and rhythms that seem to go sideways or backward as often as forward.

Few if any of those descriptors apply to Bartók's last compositions, notably his Concerto for Orchestra of 1943 and his Viola Concerto. When Bartók died of leukemia in 1945, he left the Viola Concerto in sketch form; a fully orchestrated performing version was produced by Tibor Serly, a close associate of the composer, in 1949, and several subsequent revisions have been made.

One of those revisions was produced in 1995 by Bartók's son, Peter, and the violist Paul Neubauer, who was the soloist in the concerto with the Richmond Symphony in its latest mainstage concerts.

Neubauer, a mainstay of the Chamber Society of Lincoln Center and one of the leading US solo violists, showed his mastery of the Bartók concerto from the start, delivering a persuasive blend of fast-fingered pyrotechnics and the distinctive variety of lyricism that the composer developed from Hungarian and Roma folk music.

Neubauer's treatment of the concerto was especially rewarding in its big central movement, which swings between a largo and scherzo, and in the work's Hungarian-dance finale. The violist took every opportunity to lean into the work's lyricism, as well as its demands for virtuosic fiddling.

Valentina Peleggi, the symphony's music director, crafted supportive and nicely detailed accompaniment in the concerto. Her attention to details, and the orchestra's realization of them, also could be heard in the program's opening work, Richard

Strauss' tone poem "Don Juan," and in a performance of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 in B minor ("Pathétique").

In both the Strauss and Tchaikovsky, illumination of the details of orchestration were the result not just of the conductor's attention but of the orchestra's balance of forces. With the symphony's usual complement of strings playing alongside enlarged woodwind and brass sections, wind solos and ensembles sounded with greater than usual prominence.

Oboist Victoria Chung, flutist Jennifer Debiec Lawson, clarinetist David Lemelin, bassoonist Thomas Schneider and violinist Adrian Pinteau, the orchestra's associate concertmaster, exploited their high exposure with fine technique and sensitive mood-setting.

In the Tchaikovsky, the low strings projected with the needed combination of darkness and warmth, as did the orchestra's French horn and trombone choirs.

The result was not the kind of lushly textured, overtly heart-on-sleeve "Pathétique" listeners may hear on their stereos; but expressiveness without excess pathos serves this music quite well.