

Kaler shines in Ars Viva's contrasted program of Dvořák and Bartók

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By Dennis Polkow for ChicagoClassicalReview.com



Two former Lake Forest Symphony concertmasters were reunited on Sunday afternoon: Alan Heatherington had served in that capacity as a young violinist, and Ilya Kaler had been concertmaster under Heatherington's tenure as Lake Forest music director.

Both having stepped down last May, it was great to see them working together again, this time with Heatherington's Ars Viva at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts in Skokie, collaborating on the Bartók Second Violin Concerto. (Kaler also performs as occasional concertmaster with Ars Viva.)

Kaler is a remarkable soloist, and this "greatest of 20th-century violin concertos," as Heatherington referred to it in pre-performance remarks, is tailor-made for him.

From his opening entrance, Kaler went for an edgy, muscular yet melancholy sound that was full-bodied with plenty of forward momentum. Kaler was

dominant every step of the way, always taking the lead with Heatherington's orchestral accompaniment stalwart and reliable, if sometimes too reverential.

Particularly memorable was the introspective way that Kaler made some of the chromaticism of the piece seem like a restless yearning for tonality. The middle movement was played with considerable tenderness, an entirely different sonority that with the orchestral accompaniment, had an ethereal, almost dreamlike quality to it. The jaunty finale emphasized rhythm over all else, prefiguring some ideas which Bartók would later expand upon in his Concerto for Orchestra.

Dvořák is a Heatherington specialty, and it was fascinating to experience his account of the Eighth Symphony, one of Dvořák's most popular works, after the Bartók concerto. Dvořák's optimism could not have been a more stark contrast to Bartók's *sturm und drang*.

Although Dvořák often paraphrased features and forms associated with Czech music, his themes are his own, even if like true folk music, they are lyrical and evocative enough to sound familiar within a single hearing.

Dvořák never set out to collect folk material as Bartók would later do in the early 20th century to use as material for thematic development in his own works, but rather, like Smetana, only set out to create the suggestion of a Czech aural palette. Here, Heatherington and the orchestra were in their element, the orchestral sounded solidified yet flexible, the interpretative choices seemingly inevitable.

As a salute to the Britten centenary and as Heatherington noted, a way for Ars Viva to be able to perform some Mahler, the concert opened with Britten's orchestral reduction of the second movement of the Mahler Third Symphony.

Britten used Mahler's original program title of the movement and called the stand-alone piece *What the Flowers Tell Me*. In the early 20th century, such a transcription was a way for performers and audiences to experience this music at a time when Mahler's music was still largely unknown.

Following Ars Viva's traversal of the Bruckner Sixth Symphony last month, one can understand the appeal of performing such large-scale scores, but even with Britten's reduced forces, the movement lacked the needed string heft and overall balance that Mahler's orchestration calls for to showcase this music at its best.