

# The Chautauquan Daily

Review: Neubauer soars above poorly balanced repertoire

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*Review by Leah Harrison*



**Matt Burkhart | Staff Photographer**

**Christof Perick, guest conductor and music director candidate, leads the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra with Paul Neubauer on viola as they perform Aaron Jay Kernis' "Concerto for Viola and Orchestra" Thursday in the Amphitheater.**

On Thursday night, the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra presented "Concerto for Viola and Orchestra," a work Chautauqua Institution co-

commissioned from composer Aaron Jay Kernis, with soloist Paul Neubauer in the spotlight. With a raw spirit and exceptional virtuosity, Neubauer beautifully portrayed Kernis' masterwork, one underpinned by relationships and which focused on folk tunes, as the composer described it from the Amphitheater stage.

Christof Perick, the seventh of eight CSO music director candidates, conducted the Kernis as well as Mozart's overture to *The Marriage of Figaro* and Beethoven's Symphony No. 5. This was his second and final concert as part of his audition for the CSO directorship.

Comprised of three movements — "Braid," "Romance" and "A Song My Mother Taught Me," Kernis' concerto is often somber, but not without a sense of curiosity and intrigue. Eliciting the early Second Viennese School in some places, melodies in the first movement waft through distantly related tonalities and modes, and the solo line is separated from the orchestral accompaniment.

The second movement featured deep, broad orchestral chords as Neubauer's tender and dark tone presented an honest view of romance — hauntingly beautiful and devoid of the sentimentalism associated with 19th-century romances, though the movement referenced a Schumann piano song. In the significantly longer third movement — a theme and variations — the Yiddish folk tune "Tumbalalaika" was woven throughout. As the movement mounted in drama, dissonant chords in extreme ranges channeled Krzysztof Penderecki at times, but blossomed instead into an aggressive bass drum solo juxtaposed with a measured viola solo — the two conversing with each other. Throughout the piece, there was fascinating mallet work and several horn contributions that stood out because of the great quality of player.

Kernis wrote this piece for Neubauer, and it was a special privilege to hear him play it.

Mozart opened the evening and, like Tuesday night, the pianissimo introduction was astonishingly quiet and demanded the listener to lean in — always a good start. Unlike Tuesday, the violins weren't quite together in some quick-moving sections, both in the Mozart and Beethoven. Musicians must be vigilant with well-known pieces like these in order not to fall into the trap of lethargy.

Perick made a bold impression with his excellent phrasing, executed with great dynamic contrast, in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The ensemble gave an adrenaline-filled account that fully showed the extent of Beethoven's genius, practically explaining the intimidation composers felt for decades after Beethoven's contribution to the symphonic genre. As I left the concert, I heard several patrons say this was the best rendition they had ever heard.

One last point: What a conductor programs is an important thing to notice when considering him for a permanent position, and while you expect to hear pieces and styles with which he is most comfortable, you hope he is comfortable with a variety of music. Perick presented a fairly flat repertoire range over his two concerts. Completely aside from the quality of the performance, choosing two warhorses that have become tiresome earworms in our culture on the same program was disappointing. Chautauqua is a community of progressive thinkers, people willing to consider a perspective outside of convention, and that should apply to symphonic programming, too. The ensemble's financial success is also less dependent on ticket sales than most American symphonies, so the Institution is well-positioned to champion unfamiliar

music — new, old and outside the Western canon. Certainly, hearing Kernis' viola concerto was a welcome and illuminating experience, but Strauss, Weber, two Mozart works and a Beethoven symphony overcorrect the innovation and equal a poor balance for an ensemble in a position most arts organizations would covet.

*Leah Harrison is a writer and editor specializing in the arts. She is currently Spoleto Festival USA's institutional writer and holds a master's degree in musicology from The Florida State University and a second master's in arts journalism from Syracuse University. Leah was The Chautauquan Daily's opera reporter in 2012.*