

St. Paul Chamber Orchestra review: A composer makes a fine return

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For Twin Cities classical music lovers, Thursday was a day for celebration ... or at least a sigh of relief. The rehiring of Minnesota Orchestra music director Osmo Vanska brought some closure to that dark chapter of our musical history, when each of our top-flight professional orchestras was silenced by a management lockout.

But damage was done that will likely take years to heal, and this weekend's St. Paul Chamber Orchestra concerts provide a reminder of some losses from the lockout. For one thing, the same week that Vanska resigned last fall, so did composer Aaron Jay Kernis after a 15-year tenure as head of the Minnesota Orchestra's Composer Institute, an industry-standard new music development program that may or may not be revived.

On Thursday night, Kernis was back in the Twin Cities,

taking the Ordway Center stage to be inducted into the American Classical Music Hall of Fame, then experiencing the world premiere of his latest work, a viola concerto, with one of the modern masters of the instrument, Paul Neubauer, as soloist.

The concerto proved an often gripping miasma of musical moods, a complex confluence of ideas and emotions, and a splendid showcase for Neubauer's talents. It was also the centerpiece of a consistently well-played program, ensconced between strong interpretations of an Igor Stravinsky ballet score and a Joseph Haydn symphony.

Kernis' Viola Concerto interspersed moments of agitated, chaotic cacophony with some entrancing melodic melancholy. It took some time before it really cut the soloist loose, and, even then, Neubauer had some difficulty asserting his instrument's voice above the orchestra on the opening movement. But he did so on the ensuing "Romance," making a compelling argument that few instruments can convey wistful sadness like the viola. However, it can do much more than that — and so can the virtuosic Neubauer — as evidenced by the wild ride that was the concerto's concluding theme-and-variations, "A Song My Mother Taught Me."

Conductor Scott Yoo did an admirable job of stepping in for the ailing Roberto Abbado on the Kernis concerto, but the Stravinsky and Haydn works demonstrated that the SPCO is just fine without a conductor.

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Who: The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra with conductor Scott Yoo and violist Paul Neubauer

What: Works by Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Jay Kernis and Joseph Haydn

When: 10:30 a.m. Friday, 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, 345 Washington St., St. Paul

Tickets: \$42-\$5, available at 651-291-1144 or
thespco.org

Capsule: Kernis' latest makes a gripping debut.