

REVIEW

Blake Pouliot steals the "show" from orchestra tamer

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Photo: Jeff Fasano Photography
Blake Pouliot

It's too bad for the Thursday and Saturday audiences of this concert. They will miss the highlight of the event — that is, the performance given by 22-year-old Ontario violinist Blake Pouliot, winner of the OSM-Manulife Contest in November 2016.

There is no reason to blame the OSM for scheduling an international soloist for the other performances, since no one could have known prior to the OSM Competition that the winner would be of such caliber, following in the footsteps of James Ehnes.

Several questions arise about Blake Pouliot, including the following: where was he in June 2016 when the Montréal International Music Competition was held, for which no Canadian candidate had qualified? Given the concert on Wednesday, Pouliot could have finished on the podium, second no doubt, behind the radiant Japanese Ayana Tsuji.

Blake Pouliot performed the formidable and magnificent *Violin Concerto* by Korngold. He did it much better than the well-known Daniel Hope, whom I saw struggling in Ottawa. What is formidable about Pouliot is this ease and apparent relaxation he shows, much

like the harpsichordist Jean Rondeau. Pouliot puts the listener at ease and makes them receptive to what he has to say, executing the concerto with a superb sound and well-placed sweetness.

Passing from admirable to overwhelming, there is even a little something in my ears that I can hardly define, a kind of brilliance, with sharp harmonics, and a singing strength in the upper register to equal that of the lower. In short, he displays various elements of rich sound that the great Kavakos possessed when he played this concerto here last season. Pouliot also benefited from superb accompaniment by the orchestra, and a hat-trick with the intervention of the glorious sounding horns in third movement.

Before Korngold, Vasily Petrenko directed an orchestral work by Serge Garant in honor of the 50th anniversary of the SMCQ. *Plages* was quite forgettable, but the gesture will please the experienced listener, without putting too much pressure on the general public. My favorite moment was the second of the five sections, where the bassoon interventions resembled a hybrid of Bartók and Messiaen.

Brahms *First Symphony* showed that after Shostakovich's *10th* and Mahler's *1st*, Vasily Petrenko has many fans in Montreal. The Russian is truly a born leader, and a very gifted orchestra tamer. He also has the ability to make the listener feel, much like Yannick Nézet-Séguin, that they are experiencing a symphonic adventure.

That said, Petrenko's interpretation of Brahms lacked vision and perception. Petrenko structures things effectively, but he did not seem to have a cultural affinity with this repertoire. What is the shape of the phrases? What are the contrasts in dynamic intensity? What is the relationship between *Un poco sostenuto* and *Allegro* in the first movement?

To all these questions, Petrenko brings solutions "bit by bit" rather than nourishing the music with an inherent sense of breath and aesthetic. This results in a skillfully "orchestral" Brahms, cluttered with the baggage of tradition (for example, the great slow down — which is no longer based on anything — of the last brass chorale). This presents a respectable Brahms, but old before its time, when everything in the score is actually much more energetic.

This is not so bad however, as long as Petrenko remains a guest conductor who is given the right things to conduct. Just a tip for the OSM: Try the *4th Symphony* by Tchaikovsky. It will be a change from the disastrous performance by Oleg Caetani in 2016.

Brahms according to Vasily Petrenko

Plages. Korngold: Violin Concerto. Brahms: Symphony No. 1. Blake Pouliot (violin), Montreal Symphony Orchestra, Vasily Petrenko. Maison symphonique de Montréal, Wednesday, February 22, 2017. Repeated Thursday and Saturday at 8 pm with the Concerto for piano by Schumann by Javier Perianes (instead of Korngold).