



HSO Guest Conductor Muñoz Shows Promise, But Pianist Berman Steals The Show



By Jeffrey Johnson
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The Hartford Symphony continued the public phase of its search for a new music director with a program guest-conducted by Tito Muñoz, the third of seven candidates. Muñoz conducted a program with music by Strauss, Theofanidis, Chopin and Mendelssohn in the Belding Theater, at the [Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts](#) Thursday night. Muñoz, assistant conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra, has a busy guest-conducting schedule. He was trained as a violinist and played section violin in professional ensembles around [New York](#).

Thursday's program opened with the Blue Danube waltzes by Strauss in a nod to the New Year. The Blue Danube is the encore of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra's yearly concert on New Year's morning, and it seemed to make everyone in the hall happy.

Muñoz has talent. He is particularly good at easing in and around different tempos, and he made the sense of hesitation and anticipation in the Viennese waltz come across fluently. He was also in his element in the Variations on Mozart's "Là ci darem la mano"

for Piano and Orchestra by Chopin, which is much harder to manage from the podium than he made it appear. He got an energized sound from the orchestra in the second movement of the Mendelssohn "Scottish" symphony, launched from vibrant clarinet playing that seemed to stir the entire orchestra.


The more dramatic elements of the Muñoz conducting style still need to be developed. His accent gestures were often underplayed, and he had a tendency to overuse a particular gesture of the left hand (with palm facing upward) rising up and away. The first movement of the Christopher Theofanidis Piano Concerto is marked "wild, extravagant," and it was neither at the tempo that Muñoz chose.

The Mendelssohn "Scottish" symphony is full of unusual sonorities and balances that required more attention than Muñoz gave them. And in a symphony designed to be continuous, the breaks between the first and second and between the second and third movements, though brief, still let too much energy collapse. The tighter joining made by Muñoz in connecting the third movement to the finale would have highlighted the overall concept of this symphony if he used the same spacing between the earlier movements. The best part of the evening was a monumental effort by Donald Berman, who joined the orchestra as piano soloist for both concertos in the first half of the program. The Theofanidis Piano Concerto, written for Berman in 2006, is a substantial piece. Cast in four movements, it is orchestrated vividly and is full of imaginative turns and twists. Berman's energy while playing speaks of discovery and revelation, and he crafted a delightful sense of playfulness in this music.

With only a brief exit after applause, Berman returned for the Variations on Mozart's "Là ci darem la mano" for Piano and Orchestra by Chopin. Berman seemed to have trouble making the mental transition at first, and the introduction had some clinkers. But once he reached the theme itself, he was golden. He had several memorable ideas about voicing the elaborate figuration that spins through this concerto, and he caught our attention with perspectives that sounded fresh and new. He played the famous adagio variation beautifully, making the shift into G-flat major a prolonged essay in the ecstatic.

Muñoz is young. At 26, he has talent and potential beyond imagination. It is easy to see why he is in demand as a guest conductor but hard to imagine that he is ready to handle the Hartford Symphony as music director. Nonetheless, one can easily imagine that, with a little more time to develop, he will become a force to reckon with in the world of orchestral music.

• *TITO MUÑOZ* conducts the Hartford Symphony Orchestra tonight and Saturday at 8 and Sunday at 3 p.m. at the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts, 166 Capitol Ave., Hartford. Tickets are \$32.50 to \$62.50. Information: 860-244-2999 or www.hartfordsymphony.org.

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