

Roberto Minczuk takes turn with North Carolina Symphony

The search for conductor resumes with fifth hopeful

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The New Year has arrived, and the North Carolina Symphony - after several weeks off - has restarted its active search for a new music director.

The latest guest conductor candidate, Roberto Minczuk - the fifth hopeful to visit Meymandi Hall since September - is a Brazilian with connections to the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, which he has guest-conducted since 1998.

Arriving with these impressive credentials, Minczuk's press package alone set the stage for a concert promising tremendous energy and vitality.

What Meymandi's audience ended up with, however, was a controlled musician whose communicative skills are not fully developed or audience-friendly, cool and businesslike in his approach, who makes music with a determination bordering at times on the obsessive.

As the program began with Aaron Copland's "Billy the Kid" and ended with an angst-filled Brahms symphony, there were moments where Minczuk's personal style was warranted, even appropriate.

And this ultimately came as a surprise to me, for - despite his seeming inability to "reach" beyond the printed page to form an artistic alliance with the audience - he somehow managed to draw on the orchestra's reserves to present a unified front, the proverbial proof in the pudding.

Typically, throughout the Symphony's current season, each new conductor candidate in question has little time to relay

Therefore, communication is of paramount importance when the program is played before a public audience. But Minczuk succeeded in all of these areas, and that must not be overlooked.

On first glance, Aaron Copland's "Billy the Kid" called a "ballet Western" - might seem an odd choice, but Minczuk managed to propel excitedly rambunctious story of the infamous 19th-century bandit-horn player.

The lyrical moments were quite well played, the horns, flute, bassoon, oboe and percussion.

Minczuk's unfortunate tendency toward artistic overstatement was painfully obvious as he led the evening's guest conductor, Richard Strauss's second concerto for that instrument.

It is this unnecessary trend toward drawing out performances of that "little something extra" that makes Minczuk extraordinary. Fortunately, it appears to cor

Strauss, whose father played first chair horn in the Munich court opera orchestra, was the recipient of his son's first attempt at scoring for this instrument in 1882. The elder Strauss - who, on first hearing his son's opera "Salome" years later, exclaimed, "God, what nervous music!" - was equally critical of this juvenile attempt, proclaiming the concerto "unplayable."

His father's indictment was persuasive in the extreme, convincing Strauss to pause nearly six decades before approaching this fiendishly difficult instrument again.

There are those who would argue that the French horn is an ensemble instrument only, but Strauss' two concerti demonstrate that it can - when played by a steel-lipped soloist - comfortably take center-stage.

Ruske, whose stage persona was - in marked contrast to Minczuk's - warm and approachable, played this devil of an instrument with verve, only having to fight against the wall of sound put out by the orchestra, which Minczuk - who began his own career in music as a French horn player - should have better monitored.

The Brahms Symphony No. 2 in D, Op. 73, was heard after intermission, and here Minczuk - leading the orchestra from memory - was in his element, blending the instruments in textbook manner, shaping dynamics with punch, and even throwing in unexpected tempi with satisfying results.

Speaking last fall on the orchestra's search process, Symphony Board Member Ed Woolner stated, "We are looking for an unusually talented individual who can take our orchestra to new heights. I believe we're looking for a young racehorse."

Roberto Minczuk doesn't fit this bill, though the next guest conductor, 28-year-old Michael Christie, soon to arrive in the Triangle, might just. Stay tuned.

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