

Eric Ruske

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Ruske's horn, 'Jupiter' put excitement in series finale

Music review

By Clarke Bastard
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Eric Ruske, with his blond ponytail and gold wire-rims, looks like the last flower child in search of the lost sitar, but the 23-year-old Cleveland sure plays a mean French horn. You could hang glide on his bigger breezes.

Performing with the Richmond Symphony on Saturday night, Ruske delivered more than power playing. His treatment of Mozart's Horn Concerto No. 4 in E-flat major, K. 495, explored a range of sonorities, from the wide-open (and faintly metallic) to the gently murmuring. His reading of the concerto's soulful romanza would be the envy of many an operatic baritone.

The Mozart, fine as it was, was merely a prelude to Paul Dukas' "Villanelle" (1906), a hint of how Wagner might have written in French impressionist style. Ruske reveled in the piece's numerous technical and expressive challenges; his muted tones were as pure as his open ones; his patter as secure as his fanfares.

This young horn player promises to be one of the reigning wind virtuosos of the next century.

The symphony and its music director, George Manahan, sustained the momentum they have generated in

this spring's Mozart Festival.

The orchestra's strings made sumptuous work of Respighi's "Ancient Airs and Dances" Suite No. 3, creating a silky cushion of tone in the opening *Italiana* and a fibrous but never rough edge in the concluding *Passacaglia*.

The violas (typically the most underrated of string sections) sounded close to ideal in the first of a set of string airs, and all sections rode Manahan's subtle crescendos and decrescendos with utter security and unanimity.

The program (and this season's Masterworks series) closed on the triumphant notes of Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony (No. 41 in C major, K.

551), and Manahan and the orchestra make a real exclamation mark of it.

Saturday's "Jupiter" was a magnificent balance of extroversion and lyricism, technical refinement and uninhibited joy. Manahan set fast but sensible and sustainable tempos, and allowed for expressive flexibility. The performance peaked in a rhythmically infectious minuet (for once, this is not the symphony's weakest movement) and a surging, almost fiercely articulated finale.

The program will be repeated at 8 tonight at the Carpenter Center. Ruske then will spend a week at the Hampden-Sydney Music Festival, participating in recitals Friday and Saturday nights.