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Miami Symphony soars with Sibelius

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In many ways, the Miami Symphony Orchestra remains a work in progress as it approaches its 20th season. The orchestra has gradually built up an impressive string section while woodwinds remain variable, and horns, bar-to-bar, can be a sometime thing.

Yet Eduardo Marturet appears to be slowly, inexorably raising the level of the entire ensemble. The Venezuelan music director and the MSO wrapped their season Sunday night with a program that showed the orchestra playing at the full extent of its capabilities in a worthy, mostly well-played and often thrilling program.

Along with Haydn, Wagner remains the most inexplicably underperformed composer in South Florida, so props to Marturet for leading off the evening with the German composer's *Meistersinger* Overture. The conductor and musicians gave the curtain raiser aptly big-boned treatment with weighty strings and majestic trombones.

Music of Beethoven formed the evening's centerpiece with Susan Starr as solo protagonist in the Piano Concerto No 4. A silver-medal winner at the 1962 Tchaikovsky Competition, Starr, now a professor at Rutgers, has clearly kept her technique in estimable repair over the intervening decades.

In this most lithe and quicksilver of Beethoven keyboard concertos, Starr's touch was fitfully overemphatic with a rather heavy left hand. Yet while not the last word in blazing virtuosity, Starr was a solid, often eloquent advocate. Her hushed dynamics and phrasing elegantly calmed the malign string statements in the Andante, and she gracefully assayed the give-and-take with the orchestra in the witty final movement. Marturet drew superb string playing, with less-consistent work from woodwinds and horns.

Sibelius' epic Symphony No. 2 is a challenge for even the most elevated ensembles, with intense demands on all sections, a work that can sprawl without an alert technician on the podium.

Marturet once again showed himself an inspirational leader, providing dynamic vitality, firm momentum and faultless tempos, and the MSO musicians responded with their finest playing of the season.

The conductor had the full measure of the score's austere, elemental power, pacing the ebb and flow skillfully with violent impact to the jagged brass chords.

The dark tone of the MSO strings fits this music well, and the entire orchestra served up polished, powerful playing with daunting, brassy punch to climaxes. An impressive close for the MSO with the hope of still better things to come.