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Miami Symphony opens its 20th season with Brahms

BY LAWRENCE A. JOHNSON

Although the New World Symphony and Miami Symphony Orchestra have been fixtures on the circumscribed local music scene for 20 years, they exist, strikingly, in parallel universes. The New World Symphony remains the Big Bertha of area orchestras, a training ensemble of quality, renown and endowment unlikely to be matched anytime soon. The Miami Symphony, with its heavily Latin audience and supporters, has been content to coast along with a lower profile.

Nonetheless, under music director Eduardo Marturet, the MSO has made impressive strides in recent seasons, substantially upgrading its performance quality even if it continues to rely heavily on showpieces, crossover selections and Spanish-flavored bonbons.

Marturet opened the Miami Symphony's 20th season Saturday night at the Adrienne Arsht Center's Knight Concert Hall with a representative program, featuring a cornerstone of the German repertoire alongside three shorter, lighter works.

For all its popularity, Brahms' Violin Concerto is infrequently heard in South Florida, with touring fiddlers content to hew to the Tchaikovsky-Mendelssohn reportorial line.

Like Marturet, Alexis Cardenas is a Venezuela native and clearly a gifted musician with an easy virtuosity and romantic sensibility suited to Brahms' work. At times in the concerto's long first movement, his performance felt rather small in scale, well played but literal, with a narrow range of color and expression. The climatic cadenza, especially, felt too laid-back and lacking in dramatic bite.

But Cardenas came into his own in the Adagio, where his intimate style and sweet, slender tone proved more in synch with the music's introspective reverie. He and Marturet were at their finest in the closing movement, where Brahms' insistent Hungarian-flavored main theme acquired a Latin fire and edge and led to an exhilarating coda, with the orchestra lending equally committed support.

For his encore, Cardenas, who performs with a jazz trio, displayed his populist leanings, working Brahms' themes into a solo showpiece that morphed into a lively mix of jazz and Latin syncopation.

The Miami Symphony remains a work in progress, lacking ballast in its corporate sonority, with variable horn personnel and its wind tuning a sometime thing. Still, Saturday night, the MSO played well indeed, tackling a long evening with power, unbridled enthusiasm and superb trumpet playing.

Marturet is at his best in the sort of splashy, colorful showpieces that made up the balance of the program. The evening led off with a fizzing account of Shostakovich's *Festive Overture* and closed with an exciting performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio espagnol*. In Rimsky's Iberian musical postcard, the MSO musicians made the most of their opportunities, and concertmaster Daniel Andai lent a neat peasant touch to the gypsy-flavored violin solos.

Ravel fans have had a good week, with *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, *Rapsodie espagnole*, the Left Hand Piano Concerto and, Saturday night, the *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales* all heard on local stages. Ravel orchestrated the piano Valses originally for a ballet, and the dance influence was clearly manifest in

Marturet's terpsichorean podium moves and the wonderfully graceful and lilting performance.

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