

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston

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JANUARY 12, 2018

With Roth and BSO, a Runaway Success

by [DAVID PATTERSON](#)



François-Xavier Roth (file photo)

Accentuated tympani and piano exchanges of Bartók seized immediate attention, but the extremely soft openings of Stravinsky and, especially, Webern were momentarily masked by some of Thursday night's crowd who were not quite ready for what was to come. Otherwise, a decidedly responsive Symphony Hall gathering heard works from the first quarter of the 20th century by three of its most individualistic luminaries.

If François-Xavier Roth's take on Anton Webern's Opus 1 may have slightly perplexed, the guest conductor's *Firebird* left no doubts whatsoever, so completely overwhelming performance it was. Bartok's first concerto with 20th-century music exemplar, pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard, fell somewhere between the two.

And the Boston Symphony Orchestra itself? Full-out symphonic splendor.

On the surface, the affection of Webern for Schoenberg often has led to misunderstandings. When it comes to his first opus, Passacaglia, muted trumpets, succinctness, intense contrapuntal weaves, even severe precision, among other elements, suggest that forward, that "modern" look.

Roth's tendencies stepped in such a direction. Gazing backward, more especially for nods to Mahler, the Roth-BSO thinking sought the particular in the general. More dutifully precise, the 23 variations chilled enough. The Passacaglia's three arching sections peaked similarly enough leaving the third fall short of fully achieving a gratifying climactic close.

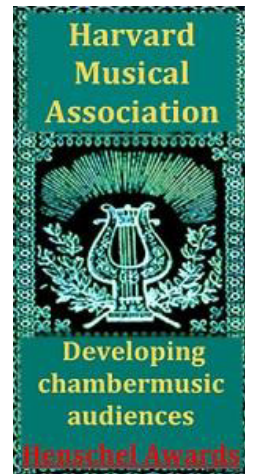
Associate Concertmaster Alexander Velinzon's brief but lyrical violin reminisced of another time. Overall, here was a gloriously sounding Viennese cosmos more intellectualized, less emotive.

The Eastern European culture surrounding Piano Concerto No. 1 of Béla Bartók surrendered in good part to artistic considerations. In row N center, the orchestra engulfed much of the piano, making it too much an orchestral instrument. A feature of the concerto, build upon build, some thwarted and others materialized, was not given enough dynamic range to make that really count.

The Andante could have teased more. The final movement did pick up real steam, flashing to a wild close. A question came up watching Aimard turn the pages of his part: did Bartók ever play his concerto from memory?

From my seat, it appeared that Roth cajoled the esteemed Pierre-Laurent Aimard into exuding a fury of energy. The resulting controlled rambunctiousness succeeded as a power play of sorts.

A runaway success, Roth-BSO's *The Firebird* (Complete) will have to have left an imprint on one of the Russian composer's major oeuvres, a favorite of his. Intended as music for the ballet, running 45 minutes, this interpretation clarified, elucidated to exhilarating ends. Ends that surpassed ballet reaching a pure symphonic encounter with perhaps some side effects, residue as it were, involving firebird imaging.



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The basses' pianissimo start was by no means the softest; there would be whispers along the way, and there was intrigue from a mild tromping pervading the opening section mustered by Roth.

Stravinsky's three concert versions hardly prepare concertgoers for that or for the many episodic expanses dealing with the ballet and its story line. The waiting through those developments with neither the ballet nor action captions projected overhead (as was done by BSO some years ago) was eliminated, so entirely was the music messaging perpetrated by this *Firebird*.

A striking stand-alone cor Anglais prefacéd an oncoming barrage of brass that in turn headed toward an animated scene that wound up, surprisingly, in crisply clipped tempo, ultimately delivering yet another absorbing Stravinsky continuum. Next, a sudden shift braced us for a gleamingly majestic concluding cadence.

Where to start for starring roles? Given that Stravinsky's score calls for inclusive participation, it was right that François-Xavier Roth shared the hooting and hollering with soloists, sections, and the entire orchestra. When did all of BSO ever sound so personally expressive, even a triangle becoming part of a maze of soloing amazements?

David Patterson, Professor of Music and former Chairman of the Performing Arts Department at UMass Boston, was recipient of a Fulbright Scholar Award and the Chancellor's Distinction in Teaching Award. He studied with Nadia Boulanger and Olivier Messiaen in Paris and holds a PhD from Harvard University. He is the author of *20 Little Piano Pieces from Around the World* (G. Schirmer). www.notescape.net

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