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Young violinist leads symphony's opener

BY LAWRENCE A. JOHNSON

In the Carnival Center for the Performing Arts' second year, the first classical performance fell not to one of the major resident companies, but to the Miami Symphony Orchestra, which opened its 19th season at the Knight Concert Hall Friday night led by music director Eduardo Marturet.

Booking the charismatic young violinist Lara St. John as first-night guest was an inspired idea. Having her play something more substantial than Piazzolla's *The Four Seasons* would have been even better.

The Argentine composer's retooling of Vivaldi's celebrated quartet of seasonal violin concertos is lightweight fare but has its charms, with Piazzolla's mix of stylish *nuevo tango* and urban Buenos Aires grit spiced by echoes of Vivaldi's original fiddle showpiece.

St. John showed herself in synch with the elegance as well as the sleaze. The Canadian violinist's technical arsenal is complete, and she flew through Piazzolla's challenges, handling the rhythmic flips, dynamic turns, and *col legno* raps with ease. The nostalgic melancholy wasn't always deeply plumbed, but St. John's deliciously drawn diminuendos had the requisite lithe languor, and she was a worthy advocate for Piazzolla's confection, throwing riffs back and forth with the small string orchestra, which provided equally agile playing under Marturet.

Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* once seemed as secure in the concert-hall repertory as Beethoven's Fifth, but seems to have lost favor in the last decade with fewer performance than previously. The Russian composer's kaleidoscopic musical take on the Arabian Nights remains a challenge for even the best orchestras with its myriad orchestral solos and technical landmines.

Under Marturet's direction, the MSO acquitted itself well Friday night with an atmospheric performance that made up in spirit and clarity what it sometimes lacked in weight and sumptuous gleam, as with the shaky horn solos throughout. Guest concertmaster Misha Vitenson contributed silken, sinuous violin solos and the woodwinds showed marked improvement with superb playing from the MSO clarinets.

Marturet was a gifted navigator through the brilliant score, bringing the requisite lyrical ebb and flow to *The Young Prince and Young Princess* and providing a suitably cataclysmic sea storm in *The Festival at Baghdad*.

The evening began with Smetana's *Die Moldau*, one of six evocative tone poems that make up the Bohemian composer's sprawling nationalistic masterpiece *MaVlast*. The river Vltava flowed along with some irregular eddies in the current Friday night. While Marturet elicited rich violin sound in the bardic opening, the hushed middle section felt more suave than ethereal and, along with some awkward transitions, the rendering would have benefited from more rehearsal time. The intermittent un-scored sound of a crying baby added to Rimsky's colorful orchestration. It's hard to decide who to blame more: the selfish parent that brings an infant to a classical concert or the Carnival Center staff that let them in.

Lawrence A. Johnson is classical music critic of the Miami Herald.

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