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Jacques Loussier: Violin Concerto No. 2 (US premiere)

This might come as a revelation to those who believe that all classical musical life in Los Angeles migrates outdoors in the good old summertime. For one evening in July, the iPalpiti Orchestra, the flagship of the region's Festival of International Laureates, holds its annual Grand Finale concert in Walt Disney Concert Hall, and it has become one of the highlights—in some years, *the* highlight—of the summer here.

Founded by two Russian emigres, conductor Eduard Schmieder and his wife Laura, iPalpiti (Italian for “heartbeats”, also the name of a Paganini piece) is composed of 22 expert young string players from all over the world. To emphasize the point, the flags of their countries of origin were hung in a colorful display in back of the stage. Yet the way these musicians played together July 25 with unforced ease and polished gorgeous tone, I was unaware of any national differences.

Schmieder's programming over the years has become quite imaginative and increasingly unpredictable. He isn't afraid to select favorites or obscurities from the past in styles that have gone out of fashion; nor is he reluctant to try new things.

After a brief frolicking baroque Allegro by Joseph-Hector Fiocco, Schmieder coupled Arensky's unabashedly lush, now rarely heard Tchaikovsky Variations with Concerto No. 2 for violin with tabla by Jacques Loussier, the same Loussier who is best known as the “Play Bach” jazz pianist. With violinist Alexandru Tomescu's silky timbre up front, the concerto turned out to be a pleasing goulash of tango rhythms, walking-bass jazz, and gypsy flourishes, with a steal from the Cuban hit song “The Peanut

Vendor” at the close of the second movement. All the while, Christopher Garcia's churning tabla (a pair of Indian drums) and mbwata (a Nigerian pottery drum) threw a bracing collection of ad libitum wrenches into the rhythmic machinery.

Tomescu and section violinist Davide de Ascaniis then served up Jacob Gade's ‘Jalousie’ in a Yehudi Menuhin-Stephane Grappelli version that fortunately decreased the high-fructose content with jazzy elaborations.

“Dances and Romances from the Heart of the Old World” was a new label for an old concept, a throwback to the days when short classical pieces were marketed on 78 rpm records and played regularly at “pops” concerts. In quick succession, iPalpiti turned out Bartok's *Romanian Folk Dances*, Borodin's Nocturne, Boccherini's famous Minuet, the Waltz from Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*, the Rigaudon from Grieg's *Holberg Suite*, an oddball adaptation of Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2*, and, as an encore, Khachaturian's ‘Sabre Dance’. In this company, Schnittke's ‘Mischievous Polka’ was not at all out of place.

Although a few conductors like Michael Tilson Thomas and Leonard Slatkin have embraced this tradition, one doesn't encounter it very often in the overture-concerto-symphony world. The key to bringing this concept back to life is to invest as much care, nuance, and energy into these pieces as one might for a Brahms symphony. And iPalpiti did just that.

As a touching closing gesture, iPalpiti honored the memory of the great folk singer-actor-world citizen (and iPalpiti board member) Theodore Bikel, who had died four days earlier, by having all the violinists but one play the lead in a continuous loop of the tune popularly known as Haydn's Serenade.

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