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Salerno-Sonnenberg: An Excellent Adventure

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Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg has not only persevered, she has triumphed. The fiercely original, deeply emotive violinist appeared as the soloist with the National Symphony Orchestra last night at the Kennedy Center, and her performance of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D, Op. 35, was as idiosyncratic as ever but also an absolute joy.

Salerno-Sonnenberg has been famous, and controversial, for a quarter-century now. Today, in her mid-40s, she is probably in the best shape of her life -- and I am not referring just to the taut biceps she displayed proudly outside her sleeveless blouse. Rather, her playing, always mercurial and exciting but occasionally a little scattershot, has become positively reliable, both musically and technically, without losing any of the wild electricity that always set her apart.

If any fault was to be found with her interpretation, it was in her characteristic tendency to break up the melodic line into fragments, now softly prayerful, now aggressively hard-charging, sometimes within a measure of each other. But this is her *style*; this is the way she has played since I first heard her about 1981, and it seems stuffy and pedantic to complain about it, especially when it is accomplished in such fine form. If you want pure, calm, pastoral lyricism, there are plenty of violinists who will provide that for you. Salerno-Sonnenberg at her best (and she was very definitely at her best last night) takes you on an *adventure*.

It was a grand evening all around. Miguel Harth-Bedoya, in his NSO debut, proved a conductor who combines rare and probing subtlety with an unfettered intensity of expression. He also had the good taste to close the program with a hallucinatory masterpiece -- "La noche de los mayas" by Mexico's greatest composer, Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940). This primal cataclysm for full orchestra and percussion (the instruments include bongos, tom-tom, timpani, xylophone and conch shell) thrills with the sheer assault of decibels it musters, but Harth-Bedoya paid tender attention to its softer, more nostalgic moments as well.

This is savage, beautiful music from a composer whose voice was stilled far too early. In "Noche," one can discern the influence of all of Revueltas's masters -- the Stravinsky of "The Rite of Spring," middle-period Copland, the sonic explorations of Edgard Varèse -- but the final result is completely Revueltas's own. If I were taking out "futures" on neglected pieces, this would be one on which I would bet heavily: I can imagine it taking a place with Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana" on anybody's Top 10 of glorious noisemaking.

The evening began with a delicate, delicious exploration of Maurice Ravel's "Rhapsodie espagnole."

The program will be repeated tonight at 7 -- and you will definitely want to attend. Tomorrow night, cellist Yo-Yo Ma steps in for Salerno-Sonnenberg with a performance of Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 2.