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Ma's Delicate Shostakovich, Writ Large

This week's National Symphony Orchestra program was to be part of an extensive Shostakovich festival, led by cellist-conductor and longtime Shostakovich friend Mstislav Rostropovich. Reasons of health forced Rostropovich to pull out and the programs to be re-crafted, but cellist Yo-Yo Ma was on hand Saturday as initially scheduled and he did play Shostakovich. It was the First Cello Concerto instead of the originally planned Second, but in his hands and those of conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya, it was a splendid foil for the Ravel and the Revueltas that surrounded it.

This is particularly delicate Shostakovich, a smallish orchestration, with transparent textures and the kind of extensive collaboration by solo horn and clarinet that could argue for the piece being a concerto grosso. Ma took it on as a wonderful chamber music opportunity. He leaned into the first violin section and seemed to take his cue from them. His extensive duets with the French horn were exquisite partnerships, and there was a sense throughout that, clear and authoritative as Harth-Bedoya's direction was, this was a player's game.

The orchestra responded magnificently and seemed to enjoy being an intimate part of the action. There are a lot of solo opportunities for various instruments in this piece, and they were handled beautifully. The winds were restrained and incisive, the ensemble was crisp, and sonorities glowed with color and light. If anyone missed a showier or more prominent role by Ma, you wouldn't have known it from the extended standing ovation that greeted the performance.

-- Joan Reinthaler