

# Punta Gorda Symphony takes flight with first concert of season



*The Charlotte Symphony Orchestra is now called Punta Gorda Symphony. (photo Steve Lineberry)*

PUNTA GORDA — The newly branded Punta Gorda Symphony made its debut Sunday evening at the Charlotte Performing Arts Center in Punta Gorda. It was in similar fashion as the former Charlotte Symphony Orchestra during its final concert in October – with long, standing ovations from an appreciative audience. The symphony’s new name was announced last month.

The object of the first ovation was the evening’s guest artist Leonid Finkelshteyn, who played his massive double bass to the “Double Bass Concerto in F-Sharp minor,

Op.3,” composed by Serge Koussevitsky, a virtuoso double bassist who conducted the Boston Symphony Orchestra for 26 years.

The almost six-foot, four-string bass is the largest orchestral stringed instrument. It ranges from the low register of a bass to almost to the sound of a violin, which is why it is also known as a bass violin. It’s twice the size of a cello, which is where it gets its name.

Koussevitsky’s concerto was described by his wife, Olga, who wrote that he “likened the inner voice of the sound of the strings to the chords of the human voice, trying to imitate the vocal arts of the great singers of his day, not merely playing on a stringed instrument, but singing through the voice of the doublebass.”

Finkelshteyn did just that, mesmerizing the audience for almost 20 minutes as his bow and his fingers moved effortlessly along and among the strings, as the orchestra, under Maestro Raffaele Ponti, played behind him, ending the first half of the concert.

The applause was thunderous, which brought Finkelshteyn, carrying his double bass, back on stage for a solo encore. Saying he wanted to thank “a wonderful audience.”

The evening began with a “tone poem,” which illustrates symphonically the content of a poem, short story or novel.

This one was Richard Strauss’ “Don Juan, TrV 156, Op 20,” the story of Don Juan, the “Seducer of Saville,” a dashing hero-villain of Spanish folk legend, a famous lover, scoundrel and seducer of women in Europe in the 17th Century.

It opened with dramatic flourishes, with each verse, high and low, representing another woman in his chase, before fading to a quiet, soft, strum, strum, strum of an ending, as Don Juan is carried off to Hell.

The second half of the evening’s performance consisted of Felix Mendelssohn’s Symphony No. 5 in D Major, Op. 107” called the “Reformation Symphony,” composed in 1830 in honor of the 300th anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession, a key document of Lutheranism and the Protestant Reformation.

It began briskly, then alternated in tempo throughout four compelling movements before ending in a lively flourish that, once again, brought the audience to its feet with cheers and applause. In a post-concert interview, Finkelshteyn, principal bass and faculty member of the North Carolina Symphony, praised the orchestra and the audience. “The orchestra was extremely responsive,” he said.

“It’s very difficult to accompany bass, not just for the low register, but very, very high, too. But because of (Ponti) it was very easy to play with them.”

“We are very lucky to get this A-list artist to come play with our orchestra,” Ponti said. “This makes the orchestra better. In fact, the audience is part of the performance. The Punta Gorda Symphony is their orchestra. They own it, they love it, they want it. The players want to please the audience and the audience wants to please the players.”