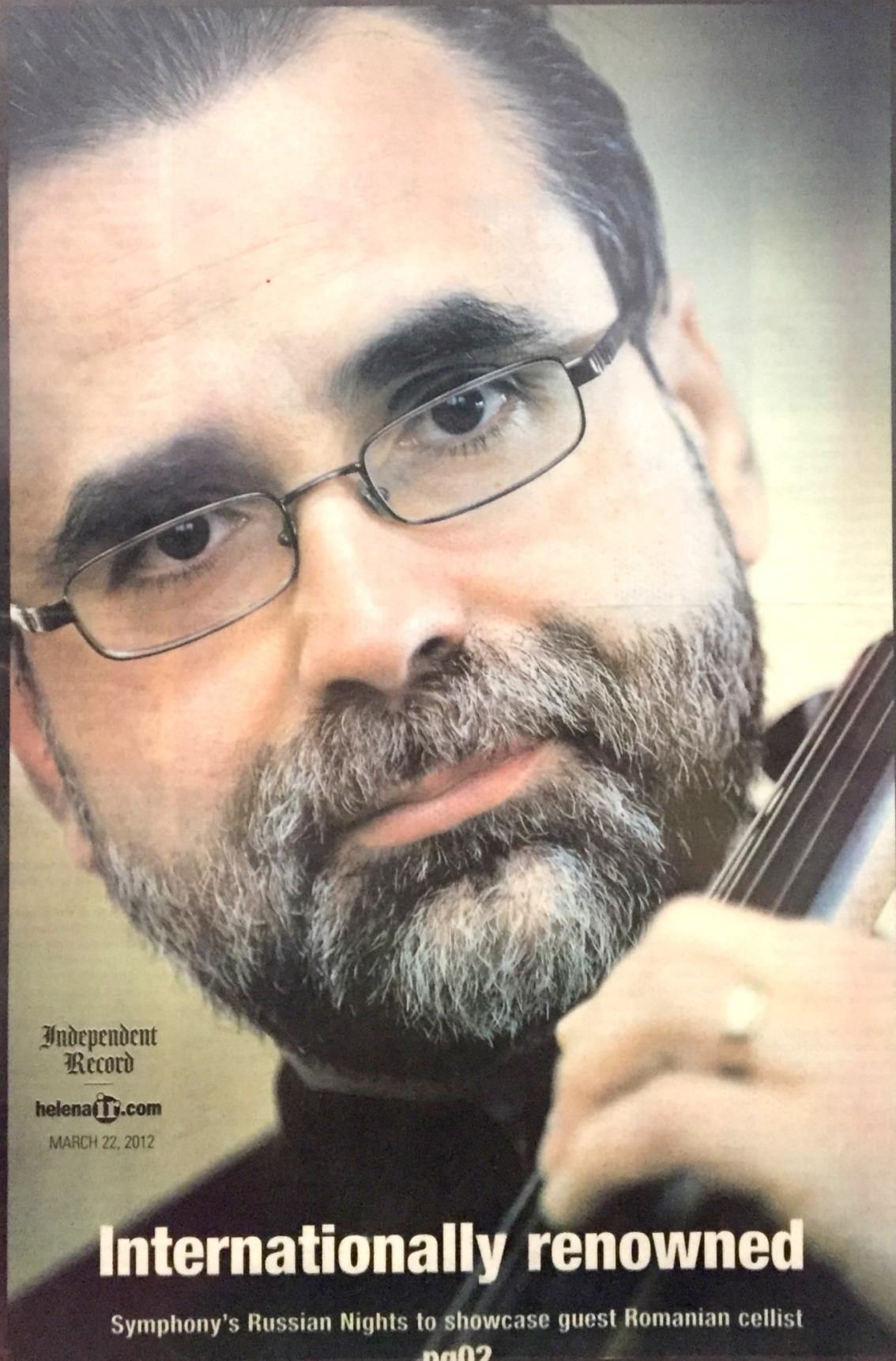


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MARCH 22, 2012

Internationally renowned

Symphony's Russian Nights to showcase guest Romanian cellist

pg02

Mastering a masterpiece

Romanian cellist Ovidiu Marinescu to perform Prokofiev's 'Sinfonia Concertante' to highlight second installment of Helena Symphony Orchestra's popular Russian Nights program

By MARGA LINCOLN
INDEPENDENT RECORD

Aclaimed guest cellist Ovidiu Marinescu brings uncommon insight and perspective to "Sinfonia Concertante," the work he will play Saturday night with the Helena Symphony Orchestra.

He performs Sergei Prokofiev's cello masterpiece at 7:30 p.m. March 24, as part of the symphony series Russian Nights: Part Two at the Helena Civic Center.

A native of Romania, Marinescu grew up at a time when that country was part of the Communist Soviet Bloc — an experience giving him a deep understanding of the governmental repression Prokofiev endured under Stalin's rule in the Soviet Union.

Prokofiev was one of five composers the government particularly singled out for attack, accusing him of indulging in "anti-democratic formalism," said Marinescu, during an interview last week in Maestro Allan Scott's living room.

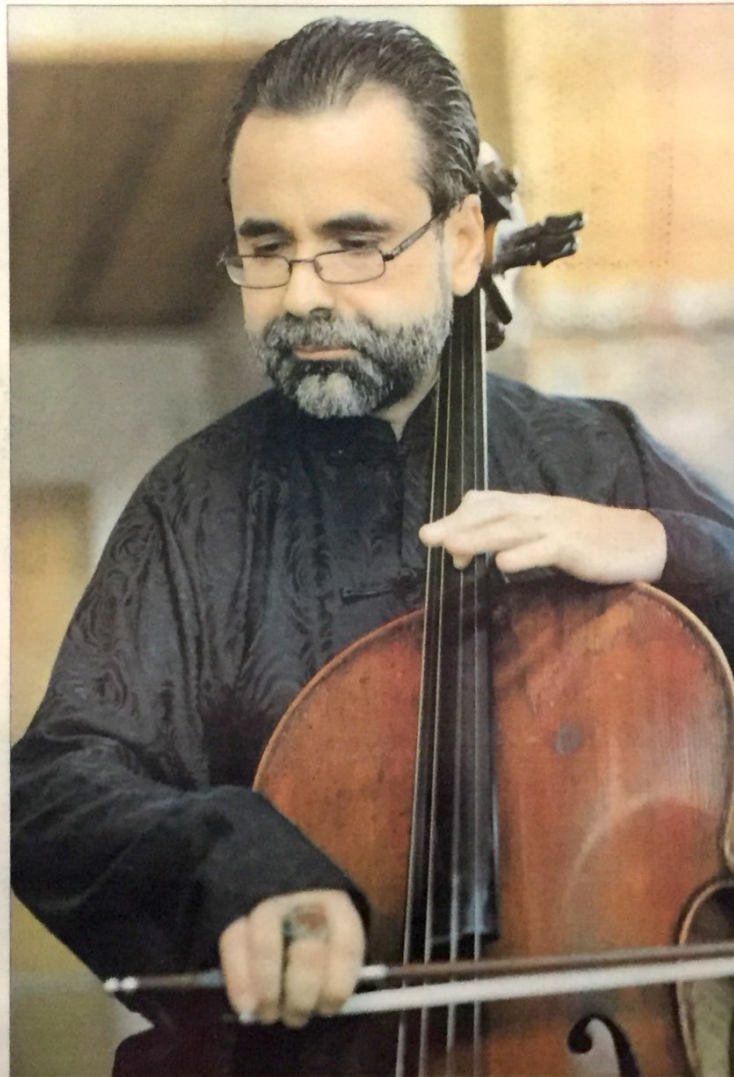
Prokofiev, along with other Russian composers, had to submit his works to a committee of censors for approval. A master of genres, he wrote such beloved works as "Peter and the Wolf," the ballet "Cinderella," as well as symphonies, operas and film scores. He was forced to compose political works like "On Guard for Peace." The censors denied approval for his most famous ballet, "Romeo and Juliet," because the ending wasn't uplifting enough.

His "Sinfonia Concertante" is considered by cellists to be the standard, said Scott. "It is ... the most difficult work ever written for cello." In fact, when Scott first looked at the cello score, he wondered if that part was even playable.

Many cellists decline to do it, said Scott, or they perform it with alternate passages. But Marinescu will perform the complete work as written by Prokofiev.

"There's some raw energy to this work and some delicate melodies. You get some raw colors and some harsh sounds. What you're left with is just watching this cellist. It's insane. It doesn't stop. It's so intense. It's so long and it's completely memorized. It has multiple stops and fast-moving passages, high passages, delicate passages and big strange jumps — strange intervals. It puts the cello through its paces."

Written at the request of one of the world's greatest cellists of all time, Mstislav Rostropovich, it is a revised and refined version of an earlier work by Prokofiev, which he considered a failure — his



DYLAN BROWN INDEPENDENT RECORD

Ovidiu Marinescu, guest soloist for the Helena Symphony, plays a song during an interview at Allan Scott's home last week.

1933 "Cello Concerto."

After the Russian Revolution, Prokofiev had left Russia and lived in many places, including the United States, but never felt settled. At the urging of a Russian colleague, he returned to the Soviet Union. At first he was welcomed as a hero, but later under Stalin he was singled out for governmental condemnation as a traitor and "formalist" along with four other prominent composers. His works were blacklisted. And his wife was arrested, charged with espionage and imprisoned in a labor camp.

"I experienced it on my own skin, growing up in Communist Romania, you don't joke with those things," said Marinescu. "People were punished, disappeared, taken to labor camps."

"This piece was written after all these events in

If you go ...

What: Ovidiu Marinescu is guest cellist and conductor for Helena Symphony Orchestra's Russian Nights: Part Two
When: 7:30 p.m. March 24
Where: Helena Civic Center
Cost: \$10 to \$50
Ticket contact: 442-1860 or www.helenasympphony.org

Prokofiev's life," he said. "Some of this must be in the piece."

"In the second movement there is a wonderful lyrical theme for the cello," he said, "and then it is interrupted by an ominous motif of the winds and snare drums. Marinescu imagines Prokofiev composing in his study and hearing something outside his door and sensing the fear."

"Everything stops. It hap-

pens twice. Then the beauty continues and the cello takes over. For me that is a very poignant moment as far as beauty and fear — sometimes the fear of the unknown."

Because of Prokofiev's controversial standing with authorities, professional Soviet orchestras wouldn't perform his works, said Marinescu. "Rostropovich presented it to the censors."

"He premiered it in 1952 with the Moscow Youth Orchestra," he said. "No conductor wanted to do it." Finally, pianist Sviatoslav Richter offered to conduct it.

Later, it was embraced and performed by Russia's top cellists.

"It's not a bon bon," said Marinescu. "It's not a piece of candy that you take in and enjoy and are done with. It's difficult to chew it. As much as looking into one's own soul

— it's looking in the mirror and facing your own demons. Who likes to do that?"

"It's an incredible piece," said Marinescu. "It's very well crafted. It's a piece where soloists and the symphony are of co-importance — all are important. It's particularly powerful because of the history around the piece."

Marinescu and Scott, who are close friends, and teaching colleagues at Westchester University in Pennsylvania performed the work there in November.

"It's so much for the cellist," said Scott. "As conductor, you just pray you help him and don't get in his way."

"I imagine ... it's like ice dancing," said Marinescu. "If you fall, you break your neck. You have to trust your partner. But that's the beauty of playing music — it's about sharing."

Scott is thrilled to share the stage with Marinescu. "This is a major recording artist, an internationally renowned Romanian cellist," he said. And it is all the more pleasurable because of their friendship.

Marinescu will return to the stage for the second half of the program to conduct Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's "Capriccio Italien."

"It was his take on Italian festivals," said Scott. "It's fun, it's very bright and very exciting."

"This is probably the piece of candy in the program," said Marinescu. "He wrote it after he took a trip to Rome where he saw festivals and parades. It has a very Italian flair."

The evening closes with Scott directing Igor Stravinsky's "Firebird."

"It's one of the greatest works of the 20th century," Scott said. It's a 20-minute suite ... inspired by two Russian fairy tales. Prince Ivan Tsarevich has to rescue a princess from Katchei, a green ogre, representing evil that vies for the prince's soul. With the help of a magic Firebird, the prince overpowers Katchei, causing him and his ogres to dance themselves to exhaustion, and frees his captives.

"This is in my top five or one of my top two works of the 20th century," said Scott. "Audiences love it. It's profound. It's virtuosic. It has all the makings of a brilliant piece of music. If I had to choose one of my most favorite, most enjoyable pieces to listen to, to conduct ... it's this. It's hard not to smile when I talk about it because I love it so much. It's such a great ending to these two (Russian Nights) concerts."