Tchaikovsky: Silverstein and BSO so so

The Boston Symphony Orchestra, Joseph Silverstein, conductor — Haydn Symphony No. 102 in B flat, Tchaikovsky; Symphony No. 4 in F minor, in concert last Tuesday.

By Joel West

There are many things that one doesn't fully appreciate until they're missing. The violin playing of Joseph Silverstein is one of those things.

During the entire evening, the violinists never seemed up to their usual standards, due to a lack of leadership from the first desk. Emanuel Borok was not inadequate as a concertmaster; but the usual combination of Silverstein and Borok is light-years ahead of the playing of Borok and Max Hobart that played on Tuesday.

One could attribute many, if not most of the problems to the last minute nature of the orchestral set-up. Silverstein was called upon to conduct the orchestra when Seiji Ozawa became "indisposed." Presumably Silverstein had a chance to rehearse the orchestra, however, and professionals such as those that comprise the BSO are not prone to make excuses.

Silverstein's conducting throughout the evening was, to put it politely, unsatisfactory. During the first movement of the Haydn, marked Largo, he seemed ill at ease and stiff in conducting what the program notes describe as "elegant." In the third movement, the Menuet: Allegro, Silverstein evoked an image of a wind-up toy, a mechanical conductor leading a very real orchestra.

Nonetheless, the orchestra gave a competent performance. The first violins, playing without Silverstein, managed to survive their long exposed passages without too much embarrassment: during the Menuet the combined violin section was at its best of the evening in each rendition of the main theme. The other strings remained unexcelled during the entire piece.

The timpanist managed to play his notes even where Silverstein's beat in- tended the violins-under the leadership of the first violin. The other strings also lacked the razor sharpness and unity that one normally would expect.

The second movement, Andante, opened with a beautiful opening solo, played with precision by the horns and pizzicato strings, followed by an extended length treatment, with the guitar and sax taking solo roles.

The concert proved that Al Stewart is capable of duplicating the expertly produced sound of his albums on the stage with the BSO. His recent album, which was played in a sold out house at the Symphony Hall, was presented with a great deal of professionalism, a welcome change.

The sound quality was quite good throughout the evening; it was well-balanced, understated, just loud enough, and usually without over-complex sound. The balance suffered during the passages that utilized string synthesis, organ, and solo synthesizer. These instruments were often held back with the background and not brought out during solos, probably because they could not cover such a wide frequency range, often overlapping the range of the other instruments.

The second set opened with "One Stage Before" and "Life in Dark Water," which were followed by the epic "Roads From Moscow" the high point of the concert. Stewart's performance of his song about the German defeat in Russia was rendered perfectly. As he sang and played guitar (accompanied by a second guitar), a montage of scenes from World War II was projected on a rear screen, providing a somber background for the hunting minor keyed song. Everything fell in place perfectly: the band's playing was tight, the vocals and string are mixed correctly, and the Spanish guitar fills could be heard.

Two more acoustic tunes, "Do Not Disturb," and "Palaces of Versailles" followed; then another new tune, "Valentine Way." Stewart introduced his piano player, who began by playing "As Time Goes By" and then into a rambunctious solo before winding down to "Year of the Cat." The concert was extended length treatment, with the guitar and sax taking solo roles.

The concert proved that Al Stewart is capable of duplicating the expertly produced sound of his albums on the stage with the BSO. His recent album, which was played in a sold out house at the Symphony Hall, was presented with a great deal of professionalism, a welcome change.

Stewart's timely passage through Boston