

A stylish musical outing at the BSO

By [Matthew Guerrieri](#)

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Fashion was on the prowl at last night's Boston Symphony Orchestra concert, both in the lobby — 10 models wearing musically inspired, student-designed gowns for a bit of interdisciplinary fun the BSO called "Project Tchaikovsky" — and in the hall, where Pyotr Ilyich himself anchored a concert saturated with Eastern European style.

These concerts mark the final scheduled appearance of Julian Kuerti's tenure as assistant conductor. (James Levine's troubles have resulted in a number of unscheduled Kuerti appearances.) Kuerti favors controlled, sweeping gestures; no matter how robust the discourse, there's always a feeling of slight restraint, a rounded sonic depth, a certain privileging of the elegant over the visceral. It was on display in the opener, the Transylvanian-born György Ligeti's 1951 "Concert Românesc," a folk-influenced pocket concerto for orchestra that owes more than a little to Bartók's example. Finely threaded lyricism and clean sparkle alternated in sharp contrast, the juxtaposition bringing out a surreal sense of humor in the music.

The humor cut sharper in Dmitri Shostakovich's first Piano Concerto, featuring the noted virtuoso Marc-André Hamelin as soloist. Scored to an efficient accompaniment of strings and solo trumpet (BSO principal Thomas Rolfs, exceptionally eloquent), the work dates from a rare happy period in Shostakovich's life, the composer young and confident, the bloom not yet off the Soviet rose. Shostakovich translated the happiness into more-exuberant-than-usual satire: genre channel-surfing (crackling marches collocated with ridiculously gorgeous melancholy), irreverent quotation (Haydn, Beethoven), brittle pop incursions that simultaneously echo and mock Western decadence. Not for nothing did the composer Nikolai Myaskovsky call the concerto "brilliant, with philistinism."

It was a marvelous performance, Kuerti's polish and Hamelin's formidable technique producing ideal quick-fire conversation, repartee, and witticisms. Assertive and dangerously clever, the music captured a jaunty vision of modern Russia that Stalinist paranoia would all too soon snuff out.

After intermission, Kuerti's vigorous side came to the fore in Tchaikovsky's slight-but-splashy Second Symphony, a large-scale trifle woven in part from Ukrainian folk sources. One of the student designers, Kinda Touma, had taken the Second as her inspiration, arranging layers of bold, bright autumnal colors into frilly curves. Both the symphony and the performance were rather like it: rustic energies, tailored and refined just enough to get in the ballroom door.