A new era for the University of Miami’s Frost School of Music began on Saturday night as Gerard Schwarz took the podium at Gusman Concert Hall for his first concert as director of the Frost Symphony Orchestra. A veteran conductor who has held posts with ensembles in Seattle, Liverpool, Los Angeles and New York, Schwarz brings wide international experience and a large and varied repertoire to his new faculty position.

From the first notes of Alberto Ginastera’s Dances from Estancia, he made his presence felt. Schwarz’s clear baton technique kept the rhythms taut. There was thrust and exactness in the opening movement, the precision of brass and winds especially strong. Over plucked strings, the solo flute and harp brought out the languor of “Danza del trigo.”

Schwarz fully captured the wildness of the Pampas in “Les Peonas de hacienda.” In the famous “Malambo,” every strand of the orchestral fabric and texture was projected with clarity, and inner
details that often go missing were audible. Schwarz had the student ensemble playing at fever pitch with the percussion battery getting a real workout. A full house greeted the performance with cheers.

Frost faculty member Aaron Tindall was soloist in Samuel Jones’ Tuba Concerto. Like the viola and bassoon, the tuba is an instrument that is often unappreciated and undervalued. Jones’ concerto utilizes the tuba as a melodic instrument. Long-breathed themes that reach into the solo instrument’s highest and lowest range take the spotlight in the opening Andante con moto. Lustrous strings often form the backdrop with eruptive brass putting an exclamation on the climaxes.

Dark lyricism of the Samuel Barber variety takes wing in the Andante mosso. The tuba as buffoon breaks loose in the rapid, repetitive figures of the concluding Allegro molto. Jones’ score is skillfully crafted and wonderfully entertaining and makes a great addition to the limited repertoire for the instrument.

Tindall was fully equal to the concerto’s challenges. He made the instrument sing as well as growl, capturing both the melodies and comedic verve of Jones’ tour de force. The soloist’s breath control was particularly striking in the moto perpetuo pulsations of the finale. Schwarz (who conducted the concerto’s 2006 premiere in Seattle) and the orchestra were in sync with Tindall every bar of the way. The strings’ silky tone and the brass’ bite and precise attack took special honors.

A finely shaded and mellow performance of Brahms’ Symphony No. 2 closed the evening and here Schwarz brought the student players to a new level. Some brass slips at the onset were quickly righted. The strings played with a richness and depth previously unheard in a UM student ensemble. With 11 double basses at stage left giving voice to Brahms’ distinctive undertow, the spacious themes of the opening movement were eloquently projected. Schwarz took the often omitted exposition repeat, the beautiful transitional passage adroitly stated without losing momentum.

Schwarz’s leisurely pace and expansive phrasing perfectly synthesized Brahms’ shades of light and dark in the Adagio non troppo. He fused the pastoral and folksy elements of the Allegretto winningly. Strong accents and vigorous string attacks infused dancelike zest in the central episode. The final movement was replete with joyous high spirits but Schwarz brought needed weight and gravitas to the second theme. Despite the hall’s live acoustic, there was consistent dynamic variety and fine balance and blending of sections throughout the performance.

A vociferous ovation brought words of praise for Frost Dean Shelly Berg and the faculty from Schwarz, and an encore of Brahms’ Hungarian Dance No. 5, played with just the right touch of Magyar paprika.

With just three weeks of rehearsal (interrupted by campus closure due to Hurricane Dorian), Gerard Schwarz achieved exceptional ensemble playing beyond the student level. His future programs this season feature symphonies by Haydn, Shostakovich and Mahler. The future of the orchestral program at UM looks very bright indeed.

Gerard Schwarz conducts the Frost Symphony Orchestra in Alan Hovhaness’s Mysterious Mountain, Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 10 and Brahms’ Double Concerto with violinist Charles Castleman and cellist Ross Harbaugh as soloists. 7: 30 p.m. October 12 at UM Gusman Concert Hall in Coral Gables. frostmusiclive.com 305-284-2400