

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

CONCERT REVIEW

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Chamber Orchestra Scores Again with Stellar Performance

By Bill Ellis

If consistency were a crime, IRIS stands accused. In its inaugural season, the Germantown chamber orchestra has been consistent four times over - in its performances, programs, leadership and guest soloists.

Saturday at the Germantown Performing Arts Centre, the ensemble, under director Michael Stern, gave more of the stellar same to 826 in attendance. And you wondered why tickets have sold so fast?

Try top-notch playing. The strings gave melancholic sheen to Puccini's impassioned *Crisantemi*, a thematic precursor of sorts to his opera *Manon Lescaut* and a melodically brimming work ripe for IRIS's romantic (in the broadest sense) ideal. Strauss's youthful *Wind Serenade*, Op. 7, showed off the ensemble's wind and horns sections; despite some sour notes here and there, the players captured the one-movement score's abundance of color, especially in creamy lines from the clarinets and oboes.

And as a unit, the orchestra gave a truly captivating reading of Schubert's *Symphony No. 8*, known as the "Unfinished" for its incomplete two-movement form. There was nothing incomplete about IRIS's understanding of the warhorse, which had a lyrical breath that suggests they'll make a great recording of this some day. Special mention must be given as well to clarinetist Jerome Simas, whose thematic solos shone brightly.

Next, try willful conducting. Stern puts together wholly fascinating programs, and he knows what to do with them. The way he pulls cantabile grace from his strings and winds is worthy enough - the Schubert, for example. But his sense of the dramatic - as in the night's closer, a rousing *Leonore Overture No. 3* by Beethoven - never needs excuse itself for having a smaller-size chamber orchestra to lead. Always count on the big interpretation from this fellow.

Finally, try internationally acclaimed soloists. First, IRIS welcomed cellist Yo-Yo Ma, then pianist Garrick Ohlsson. Saturday, it was Sony recording artist and violinist Cho-Liang Lin, Musical America's Instrumentalist of the Year in 2000. Lin's muscular approach was perfect for Prokofiev's demanding *Violin Concerto No. 1*. Edgy and inventive, the 1917 landmark asked everything from Lin - speed, power, dexterous double stops, exhausting scalar work and capricious ornamentation from bird trills to gypsy filigree - and he gave it in blitzy, flamboyant style.

So, too, did Stern, who conducted the modern classic with a coaxing, impressionist depth reminiscent of Kent Nagano's way with 20th Century music.

At the heart of every IRIS concert, emotional resonance reigns.

Could that be why tickets go so fast?