

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

CONCERT REVIEW

May 5, 2003

BRONFMAN AND IRIS OFFER BRILLIANT CLOSE TO THE SEASON

Most of the musical energy of the Mid-South was aimed at downtown Memphis and the Beale Street Music festival Saturday night, but no small amount of power emanated from the Germantown Performing Arts Center far to the east, where soloist Yefim Bronfman thundered through Brahms's monumental Second Piano Concerto with the IRIS orchestra.

Michael Stern, musical director and conductor of IRIS, concocted an interesting group of works for the orchestra's last performance of the season.

Robert Schumann's Overture to Manfred, Op. 115 is a vigorous and brooding homage to the grandeur and isolation of Byron's tortured hero. It's not difficult to see Schumann, 38 at the time, looking at his own life of struggle and fitful success as he descended into depression and madness.

Stern elicited from the strings the velvety sound that is becoming the young orchestra's trademark and brought out with mounting bravado the work's haunting solemnity and restlessness.

In 1951, American composer Samuel Barber turned out *Souvenirs*, Op. 28, a nostalgic look at six forgotten dance-forms such as the two-step, the tango, the galop. Originally written for piano, four hands, the work was soon transcribed for full orchestra.

The composer asks for no irony yet supplies his own by allowing harmonies to clash and by layering hectic surfaces for subversive effect. The second section contains its own sly wit, while five is a lugubrious tango, followed by an elegant breezy exercise in music for an Audrey Hepburn movie.

IRIS captured these shifting moods and rhythms with panache and good humor.

Finally, there was Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 2, in B-flat major, Op. 83, written in the summer of 1878, when Brahms was 45. A work of resolute confidence, rhythmic complexity and melodic verve, its four movements may feel symphonic, but the structure never wrestles from the piano its supreme domination.

Brahms may be looking back on a life of increasing fame and security, though the fiery second movement and heavenly andante third movement perhaps refer to a connection he had with Schumann; for years Brahms was in love with Schumann's wife, Clara, who refused to marry the devoted suitor after her husband's death in 1856.

Bronfman sits solidly on the piano stool, a dynamic, powerful, tuxedoed bear. His interpretation and technique are intelligent and deeply felt. Though he bobbed the climactic upper notes of several inhumanly fleet runs, this seemed not to matter compared to the passion and directness with which he played. His statement of the heartbreaking themes in the third movement, ethereally balanced against the melody beautifully wrought by principal cellist Felix Wang, could not have been better.

The orchestra itself performed with tremendous conviction and unity.

For encore, Bronfman ripped one of Rachmaninoff's most martial Preludes from the stalwart Steinway and flung it at a grateful audience.