

Michael Stern and Eight Blackbird

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'Blackbird,' IRIS players take wing

Amazing musical adventures just keep on coming with IRIS. Maestro *Michael Stern* programmed and executed yet another sterling concert with the chamber music orchestra Saturday night at the Germantown Performing Arts Centre, one that was rich, diverse, sexy and surprising.

Featured guest group *eighth blackbird* --- the name taken from a Wallace Stevens poem -- is a stunning sextet of exceptional ability. The six musicians performed "Split Horizon," a 2003 composition by the young Minnesota-born David Schober, who was present and introduced the piece.

On occasion, a composer and performer will seem supremely well matched. So it is with Schober and *eighth blackbird*, perhaps because the composer and group members attended Oberlin College together and carry an implicit understanding of what they want and where they want to take it.

"Split Horizon" is an astonishing work, complex, dense and textured, often frenetic, sometimes eerily quiet, at times exuberant and sorrowful. And it is never boring, from the opening swinging passages to the final, explosive, breathtaking zing. The musicianship of eighth blackbird is as splendid as the group is fun to watch. They're all young, attractive and perform with compelling energy. Standing ovations are sometimes too freely given, but theirs was fully deserved.

Stern is not known for slacking off on any part of his program. The opening work, "The Elements" by the rarely recorded 18th-Century Frenchman Jean-Fery Rebel, was a bag of delights and surprises that contained typical configurations of the day but also a startlingly dissonant opening work that surely shocked the royal Gallic sensibilities that first heard it.

The second half of the concert began with the contemporary "Musica Celestis" by Aaron Jay Kernis, a gentle-but-firm ode to the spirit. Stern elected to segue from that directly to the Mendelssohn Symphony No. 5 (Reformation) as they shared certain musical and thematic characteristics. It was a typically untypical savvy move by the maestro that further highlighted the precise, elegant nature of the IRIS orchestra. It moved from gossamer passages to beautiful "Amens" to mighty crescendoes with its usual authority.

Karen Busler, a gifted local flutist, had an especially strong night as did concertmaster David Bowlin. If there was any downside to the evening, it was that not all the seats were filled. It only proved that some folks missed a sublime opportunity.