

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

CONCERT REVIEW

January 16, 2006

GPAC's best plays Vienna's finest: IRIS in a glorious waltz

By Jon Sparks

Maestro Michael Stern delivered the best of the best Saturday night.

He imported some of the finest Viennese tunes imaginable and got the IRIS Chamber Music Orchestra to give one of its best realized performances at the Germantown Performing Arts Centre.

Topping it off was guest soloist Jonathan Biss, whose serene confidence possessed his performance of the Mozart Piano Concerto No. 21.

The work seems light, in part because of the first movement's nursery-rhyme-on-steroids demeanor. But Wolfgang's first impressions unflinchingly evolve into exquisite expressions of amazing beauty.

Biss, who was 14 when he made his Memphis debut at Artists Ascending in 1994, played the concerto with ease while carefully working each note and phrase with precision and elegance.

As exemplary as Biss was on the Mozart, it was his minute-and-a-half encore that showed what the kid is capable of. His stunning performance of the first of Schoenberg's Six Little Piano Pieces was simply exquisite.

Earlier in the evening, IRIS had performed Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony No. 2. For many listeners, this seems to be the equivalent of being force-fed steamed cauliflower, yet it was far and away the deepest and most mind-bending piece of the evening. It's a work that embodies the agonies and beauty of the first half of the 20th Century, richly complex and demanding.

Putting gems like this on the program gets grumbles from some, but Stern is doing exactly what he should -- offering brilliant compositions rarely heard live. Otherwise you get performances that do nothing but churn out reliable but unchallenging favorites. The term for those is "pops concerts" and there are other places to go for them.

Not that Stern avoids the frothy. Lehar's "Overture to the Land of Smiles" was the smiley face of the evening, an overfed operetta tune wandering about in search of an old Hollywood potboiler to get in front of.

At the top of the evening, however, was Debussy's sublime "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun," splendidly realized with minimal performers.

The evening ended with works by the archetypal Viennese composer, Johann Strauss Jr. The "Wine, Women and Song" waltz was on the money and the encore, the Strauss piece "Eljen a Magyar" (Long live the Hungarians), was a vigorous delight.

Long live IRIS.