

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

CONCERT REVIEW

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The brilliance of Amadeus: IRIS celebrates genius' musical perfection

By Jon Sparks

Music hasn't been the same since Wolfgang Mozart came into the world 250 years ago. In honor of his genius, Saturday night's concert by the IRIS Chamber Music Orchestra ended its season with a triumphant run of three symphonies and a piano concerto, all revealing different sides of the master, all gloriously performed and all challenging how we regard the concept of perfection.

Rigid philosophers may insist that perfection is unattainable, but there's no stopping the use of the word when it comes to Mozart. Performers, conductors and listeners fall back on the term, spurred by the transcendent qualities of form, harmonies, intelligence and the gut feeling that each moment could be no other way.

Saturday's opening piece was Symphony No. 1, written by the 8-year-old prodigy in 1764 and possessed of that odd combination of being childlike and fully realized. Maestro Michael Stern's orchestra sought that perfect combination of fun and discovery the work embodies.

When composing it, little Wolfgang is reported to have said, "Remind me to give the horn something worthwhile to do" -- kids really do say the darndest things -- and happily, he not only tossed a bone to the horns but the entire work, like a budding architect with Legos, foreshadowed much of what he would create in the rest of his life.

The second piece, Symphony No. 31 ("Paris") is from the 22-year-old who by this time was seasoned and shrewd. He needed money, so he wrote this work in Paris tailored to French tastes. But it was not a cynical sellout; the symphony is possessed of style and sophistication.

The first half of the program at Germantown Performing Arts Centre ended with the Piano Concerto No. 23 with 19-year-old soloist Yuja Wang at the keyboard.

It is fitting to have a prodigy play another prodigy's work. Her playing was pure and expressive and her technique seemed very near that standard of perfection. Her standing ovation underscores my minority view that her performance, though mature for one so young, lacked a true passion. Yuja's splendid execution masked the harder-to-define qualities of spirit and emotion that make a venture truly great.

The example for that came after intermission when IRIS gave an electrifying rendition of Symphony No. 41 ("Jupiter") that was so vital it was combustible. The tiniest nuances and smallest silences blended perfectly with the sweeping sounds and grand moments.

And that's what I mean when I say "perfectly."