

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

CONCERT REVIEW

September 20, 2000

Ma, Stern Resonate Far Beyond the Musical Score

By Bill Ellis

Given that Tuesday was the debut splash of Germantown's new chamber orchestra, IRIS, it was an odd evening to label a reunion.

Yet that's exactly what the concert was for its two leading men - cellist Yo-Yo Ma and conductor Michael Stern - who together visited the Germantown Performing Arts Centre in 1998 for GPAC's fifth-anniversary gala.

It was at that event, in fact, where the seeds of IRIS were first planted, so the Stern and Ma coupling on Tuesday held plenty of resonance beyond the notes.

For the sold-out crowd of 870, music, not memories, was first order.

Ma simply wowed them.

As the leading cellist of his generation, Ma captured passion on his instrument in the way few can, whether he was mining pathos in Faure's Elegy for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 24, manhandling Tchaikovsky's daunting yet delicate Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33, or finding the right combination of virtuosity and optimism in Lukas Foss's Capriccio, orchestrated (at the request of Ma) after the composer's 1946 cello and piano original.

The person out to prove something was Stern. The former principal conductor of the Saarbrucken Radio Symphony Orchestra has taken directorship of IRIS. He has also shown a willful commitment in his far-from-green ensemble by hand-picking its members, 51 strong for the inaugural performance. Stern, the son of violinist Isaac Stern, needn't rely on his father's name for kudos since the younger musician has plenty of panache all his own.

And he knows it.

Why else bookend the concert with two of the most triumphant pieces in all of classical literature - Copland's Fanfare for the Common Man and Beethoven's Symphony No. 5? Talk about making a statement.

Even so, Stern's program was full of subtlety and finesse, chosen, one assumes, to cleverly show off the inherent strengths he and his orchestra can offer.

In short order, the confident brass were atypically nonbrassy, opting for a creamy blend in the Copland. Bernstein's jazzy Three Dance Episodes from the musical On the Town provided the blast of Americana that IRIS plans to make part of its entertaining agenda. And it showed that Stern's group of musicians already has a mature sense of balance and dynamics.

And the Beethoven, given a performance by smaller than usual forces, left the evening hanging on the most important aspect of an ensemble bound for great things: skillful interpretation.

Stern - a jovial, talkative fellow - was all lyricism and line with his baton as well. Like IRIS, he came across as an American classic in the making.