

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

CONCERT REVIEW

November 15, 2004

IRIS bloomed again on Saturday night

By Jon Sparks

Maestro Michael Stern, again showing consistency, presented a memorable program by the chamber orchestra that informed, delighted and astonished.

The evening's guest artist at the Germantown Performing Arts Centre was pianist Stanislav Ioudenitch, the brilliant winner of the 2001 gold medal at the Van Cliburn competition. In two 19th Century pieces, Ioudenitch displayed an exquisite touch with those spring-loaded fingers running up and down the keyboard with an easy confidence.

The first was Cesar Franck's "Symphonic Variations," a delicious work that is, as Stern noted, a conversation between orchestra and soloist. Franck can be pretty gooey, but Stern guided his players away from the sentimental, which allowed Ioudenitch expressive latitude that he achieved without a hint of mawkishness. It was, in fact, as refreshing and smart a conversation as you could hope for.

Next up for the soloist was Frederic Chopin's Variations of "La ci darem la mano" from Mozart's "Don Giovanni." Chopin knocked this lively work out on his summer vacation when he was 17, which you may wish to use as an object lesson for your own teen. Ioudenitch did it virtuosic justice, weaving the Chopinesque flourishes and the Mozartian wit into a beautifully realized performance. His bravos were well earned.

The evening started with the orchestra's amazing rendition of Ives's "The Unanswered Question." The unusual piece was given unusual stage treatment. From darkness, a light fell first on the conductor, then the four woodwinds center stage, and then on the strings behind a scrim at the back. The first note from the strings was the softest soft it is possible to create and the subsequent colloquy was simply mesmerizing.

The unanswered question in question seeks to know the meaning of life. It is an elegantly spare approach that contrasts with Mahler's hyperbolic Symphony No. 2, performed last year by the Memphis Symphony Orchestra.

The final work of the evening at the packed GPAC was Dvorak's Symphony No. 8 in G major. Stern, a savvy programmer, puts these crowd-pleasing works in every concert and they never fail to have the intended effect. The orchestra performed with such intelligence, balance and verve that standing and cheering seemed like the only proper thing to do.