

Michael Stern

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IRIS serves up another winner

Emotion is evident in solid showing

The power, precision and beauty of the string sections reverberated through the Germantown Performing Arts Centre at Saturday night's IRIS Chamber Music Orchestra concert.

For sheer emotional potency, not much beats Bartok's Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta. It's a masterpiece, soaring with intelligence while being greatly admired by musicians who love the challenge. The audience, not universally fond of 20th Century music, stood and gave the orchestra and Maestro Michael Stern an enthusiastic thumbs up for a performance that showed IRIS at its best. There were moments exquisitely sad and others insanely frenzied. The musicians would fade to impossible softness or wield aggressive blankets of sound -- and it was one of the finest performances of the season.

The evening's guest soloist was Jerome Simas, a clarinetist who was an IRIS regular when the orchestra began its run in Germantown. His featured piece was Copland's Concerto for Clarinet and String Orchestra, with Harp and Piano.

As Copland compositions go, this one is so-so. The first movement is supposed to evoke sentimental blues, but it is neither sentimental nor bluesy. It's a turgid thing that forces the soloist to labor through some dull passages and it sounded that way.

When the cadenza finally showed up, Simas was able to let go and show some virtuosity. He had a couple of rough patches and never quite got a great full-bodied sound that would blend with the orchestra. The jazzier second half of the Copland had some fine moments and a socko ending, providing some redemption.

The opening number was Luciano Berio's Concertino for Clarinet, Violin Concertante, Celesta, Harp and Strings. It was a rich, textured opening number. Stern called it a funny little piece, but it was smart, too, and a delight as composition and in IRIS's performance.

Closing the evening was Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings in C major with that warm, rolling and spiritual opening that led through a blaze of colors and emotions. It showed off the orchestra's amazing string sections, rounding out the evening superbly well.