

REVIEW: Stunning performance by THSO, piano soloist

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Crowd-pleaser: Sean Chen was the piano soloist at the Terre Haute Symphony Orchestra's latest concert.

If one wanted to find a single composer whose compositions would be the only ones chosen for an entire evening of classical music, no better example could be selected than Johannes Brahms. His music has gorgeous melodies, striking rhythms, interesting developments, magnificent climaxes and has broad appeal over a wide range of ages and educational attainments.

Last Saturday night, a large and enthusiastic audience received such a treat at Tilson Auditorium, presented by the Terre Haute Symphony Orchestra and a brilliant soloist. The concert began with three Hungarian Dances for orchestra, carefully chosen by Maestro Bowden. Immediately, we heard fetching melody underscored by lilting rhythms with a strong gypsy flavor, a compelling and light-hearted way to begin the concert.

The next work, however, showed Brahms at his deepest and most introverted style. His D Minor Piano Concerto is a major staple of that genre and brings out all of the pathos and strong melodic character we associate with him.

Sean Chen was the stunning piano soloist. After winning the American Pianists Association competition in 2013, Chen was catapulted into a striking career playing with major symphony orchestras as well as

appearing on solo and chamber music recitals throughout the world.

Chen possesses a flawless technique and played series of octaves at a pace that took your breath away. In addition, he produced heart-rending melodic lines with clarity and beautiful phrasing rarely heard from the piano. The orchestra seemed inspired by him as well, and the communication between conductor, soloist and instrumentalists was a sheer pleasure to experience.

Speaking of young geniuses, Johannes Brahms received enviable plaudits as his career unfolded. Robert Schumann wrote in one of the major publications of the day, "Hats off!! . . . A Genius!! The then 20-year-old Brahms went on to fulfill every expectation that one could have for a budding world-class musician.

There would be no better way to exhibit great musicianship than the D Minor Piano Concerto of Brahms. The combination of resonant, ingratiating orchestral playing and a soloist fully up to the task brought the audience to its feet in a rousing ovation. The first movement — one of the longest concerto movements in the entire literature, presents sober, sad, melancholy music until the emergence of the constantly-shifting harmonic patterns finally give way to a

Artist Management

needed serenity.

It is important to note solo passages played by various orchestral musicians. The murderously difficult parts given to the solo horn players were superbly handled by Brian Kilp and Layne Anspach, both of whom dispatched the feared notes with amazing execution. Special attention is also due Samantha Johnson-Helms, whose clarinet solos were major additions to the concert.

Poignant melodies were present throughout this concert, which could have been easily shattered by cracked or "split" notes. We heard virtually none of those common mistakes last night.

After intermission, Maestro Bowden chose Brahms' Second Symphony in D major. It is interesting to note that the composer waited until he was 44 years old to compose his first symphony. Plagued by self-doubt and having in his mind the great symphonies of Beethoven and Schumann, he could not bring himself to tackle a symphonic project until he was well into his compositional career. Having completed that, however, he began work on his second symphony and finished it in four months. A full-scale work of four movements, this symphony was immediately championed by Schumann, Liszt, Wagner and other masters. It is a much more lyric piece than his first, rich in melodic ideas.

In programming this demanding repertoire, Maestro Bowden showed great faith and security in his players. They responded with equal confidence to produce a stunning performance of one of the hallmarks of symphonic writing. The Maestro is intent on bringing great music to communities where he is in charge of making those decisions.

Citizens of Terre Haute should be enormously proud that an evening of memorable music-making can take place at such a high level. All participants should be, and indeed were, roundly applauded.

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