

Review: EPO finishes Classics season with a special performance

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Saturday's Evansville Philharmonic Orchestra final Classics concert was special in so many ways.

In the first place, the stage was filled with musicians professional and aspiring. It was the annual Side-by-Side concert, where young musicians perform next to orchestra members. Before the music began, executive director Kimberley Bredemeier introduced both the 2023-24 concert season as well as the new logo that celebrates both the EPO and its family (which of course includes the young people, all of whom were sporting the new look on t-shirts).

Then Roger Kalia entered, took up the baton, and conducted the first composition, "An Act of Resistance," by up-and-coming American composer Joel Thompson.

At first, the orchestra sounds almost angry; this section grows to a clashing climax. A second section begins more tunefully, but it, too, reaches a noisy end. The finale, however, puts all the discord to rest as orchestra members rise to their feet as they intone the word “love.”

The members of the Youth Orchestra — which has doubled in size in recent years — have obviously been well prepared by their leader Chun-Ming Chen. I know that many audience members were moved by both Thompson’s piece and the sight of so many young people “sharing the love” on stage.

To be honest, the concert could have been called “Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto,” so thrilling was the performance of heralded soloist Sirena Huang with the capable participation of the EPO. It is astonishing to me how such young performers can play with such mature musicality. She played upon a 1739 Guarneri violin, whose velvet sound easily filled the Victory Theatre.

The concerto lived up to all expectations — ethereally light when necessary, luscious lyrical sound in the second movement, flashy filigree in the final movement. Clearly enthralled with the performance and its performer, the audience demanded a number of curtain calls at the end.

All EPO forces were mustered for the signature composition, the gigantic fifth symphony of Dmitri Shostakovich. Kalia spoke to the audience, many of whom were hearing this work with the first time. He noted how the work resurrected the composer’s reputation at a time and in a country where official sanction could be fatal to an artist.

There is so much pathos in the symphony — from the first movement where strings audibly sigh and cry out to the eerie third movement with its heart-rending climax and its unexpected conclusion as the harp and celesta together whisper the melody as the strings play a chilling tremolo — before the orchestra fades away on a major chord.

Shostakovich included many solo lines for the instrumentalists, particularly woodwinds; all sang out beautifully. The piece also features a big, sometimes bombastic, brass section; it was in great form Saturday night.

The final movement ended with a Mahler-like jubilant essay on a D major chord after all sections of the orchestra had gotten a thorough musical work-out. Bravo to all musicians and to Roger Kalia.