

## Evanston Symphony concert as good as gold

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Recommend

By DOROTHY ANDRIES

When a symphonic work is being played, it's unusual for the composer to be sitting in the orchestra. But Sunday afternoon (Feb. 3) at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston Don Draganski, principal bassoon of the Evanston Symphony Orchestra, had that distinct honor.

The opening work on the ESO's program was "Overture With Fanfares" which Draganski wrote for the 50th anniversary of the founding of the orchestra, and music director Larry Eckerling decided it was good enough to be played again.

It is indeed a celebratory piece, full of drum rolls and rat-a-tat-tat brass passages. But Sunday it was more than that. For brief moments it danced as if it had popped over from Gershwin's "American in Paris," and the horns were frequently heard through a veil of gossamer strings.

The percussionists in the orchestra had occasion to shine, with snares and timpani getting the lion's share of the action. The music was fresh and exciting, worthy of a golden anniversary, but like a gift of gold, as good as new years later.

Its conclusion was enigmatic, the sound just fading away, almost as if the orchestra were disappearing. The players were more than equal to the score's modern harmonies and quixotic rhythms. And it seemed as if they were having fun as well.

The orchestra's principal flutist Sherry Kujala was soloist in "Poem for Flute and Orchestra" by American composer Charles T. Griffes. It was written in 1918 and features hovering strings and diaphanous phrases. Kujala played the work with agility and grace.

### Second Symphony

Rachmaninoff's massive Symphony No. 2 took up the second half of the afternoon's program and bore no resemblance at all to the earlier numbers. Like the composer's piano concertos, this piece bursts with Romantic melodies and tests the limits of the players' skill.

The quality of the performance bore witness to the seriousness and dedication of the musicians and Eckerling's continued ability to get the most out of them.

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This symphony begins with a *Largo* movement, coming slowly and deliberately from the lowest instruments in the orchestra -- as if from under the sea. Despite a tenuous start, the strings soon found their voice and their music flowed like waves, ebbing and flowing and ebbing once again.

The first movement alternated between oceanic mystery and sunny open-handedness, one moment forthright, the next oblique and dreamy. Eckerling led his forces to a summit, then harbored them as they returned to the nether regions again.

And that was only the first movement!

### **Glorious Adagio**

The heart of this piece, of course, is its third movement, *Adagio*, which contains some of the most beautiful music ever written. The Evanston Symphony's strings dug into those phrases and, without compromising any lyricism, built powerfully to the composer's muscular crescendos.

When that beauty was spent, the movement concluded with something like a star shower, with crystalline notes falling gently to earth like -- sorry to mention it -- snow. The audience sat in rapt silence at its conclusion, obviously touched by the loveliness of the music and its moving performance.

The final movement was a grand sweep, the orchestra playing with singular distinction. Its long, extended conclusion challenged each section of the orchestra, which, from strings, to woodwinds, to brass and percussion, were equal to the task.

Let's have a shout-out for this 100-piece community orchestra. And with the composer and soloist both residents, the ESO must surely be pride of Evanston.

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