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## ESO concert is double the fun

March 20, 2008

By **DOROTHY ANDRIES** Classical Music Critic

The Evanston Symphony Orchestra was joined by the North Shore Choral Society Sunday afternoon at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston, and one and one made much more than two!

The addition of this 102-voice ensemble, which has been singing in Evanston since 1936, added a lovely dimension to the ESO program.

The choristers appeared on the second half of the program in Poulenc's "Gloria" with soprano Michelle Areyzaga as soloist. She's a favorite around the Chicago music scene and in addition to the Poulenc, she treated us to seven of Canteloube's "Songs of the Auvergne."

Canteloube did not write the melodies, but he collected 33 of these folk songs from his native area of France and gave them dazzling orchestrations. Most of the songs Areyzaga chose were unfamiliar to me, but they were by turns touching, humorous and high-spirited.

In this glowing performance, the young soprano showed us that in addition to her shimmering voice she is also quite an actress, imbuing the songs with her vivacious personality. She sang in the dialect of the Auvergne region, not French, which also gave them a unique aura.

The Evanston Symphony and conductor Larry Eckerling provided an accompaniment that was not only supportive, but deeply sympathetic. They mined the score for color and texture and handily delivered the evocative, challenging and often comical settings.

The "Gloria" was a contrast to the songs, but it was not particularly

solemn. We sat in the balcony and the massive choral voices sounded rich in the concert hall's fine acoustics.

The "Laudamus" was downright lively, the flute passage in the "Domine Deus, Rex Caelestis" was glorious, and the "Agnus Dei" was, well, heavenly. Areyzaga voice soared gracefully above and around and through the accompaniment, light but never faint, direct, but buoyant in its fluidity.

The chorus was prepared by Donald Chen, who was acknowledged on stage after the finale.

The program also included two highly entertaining shorter pieces. Eckerling opened with Bizet's popular L'Arlesienne Suite No. 2, with four movements that amply showcased the talents of the orchestra's various sections.

The flutes and woodwinds gracefully imparted the mood of the "Pastorale," while in the tender "Intermezzo" the strings demonstrated what a strong and cohesive force they have become under Eckerling's baton.

It was no surprise that the third movement, with harp and flute predominating, reminded us of the "Entr'acte" from the composer's opera "Carmen," and the magical march "Farandole" was played with consummate professionalism.

Just for fun, Eckerling also tucked in Dukas' madcap, swirling "Sorcerer's Apprentice," which sounded at times like music from John Williams' "Close Encounters."

This is only the fourth time the choral society has sung with the Evanston Symphony, but these two groups seem to be made for each other. Wouldn't it be great if they gave a concert together every few years?

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