

Evanston Symphony Orchestra concert a celebration of brass

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The Evanston Symphony Orchestra is a community ensemble of special character. The players, 100 of them, are all amateurs in the best sense of the word — those who love making music and want to be with like-minded serious players.

Their music director, Lawrence Eckerling, led the ensemble in a highly entertaining program the afternoon of Feb. 7 at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston. It provided a palpable example of how well this community orchestra can play and how much fun the audience can have, just sitting back and listening.

Eckerling might have called this concert “Brassed Off,” since nearly all of the program was a celebration of brass instruments and the glorious sounds they can make in the right hands.

Soloist in Haydn's Concerto for Trumpet and Orchestra was Don Cagen of Northbrook, first trumpet in the Evanston Symphony, who also has his own band. The man is at home with a trumpet and his performance was skillfully done. His colleagues and the audience applauded him mightily for his work in this challenging piece. As an encore, he was accompanied by Maestro Eckerling on the piano in Gershwin's “Someone to Watch over Me.” It gave us a chance to hear the mellow, melting sound that Cagen can coax out of a horn. Plus, a little Gershwin is always welcome!

The concert opened with the Concerto for 7 Trumpets and Timpani by Johann Ernst Altenburg. You may not think you know this piece, but in fact it is the brass music that heralds the classical concerts at the Ravinia Festival each summer. Seven trumpeters, only one a woman, performed the piece with gusto. They are students of Charles Geyer and they returned for Janacek's “Sinfonietta” which is known for its brilliant brass melodies.

Eckerling, however, had a surprise for the audience. In advance of the “Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis” by Ralph Vaughan Williams, he was able to secure the 27-voice Chicago Chamber Choir, directed by Timm Adams, to sing the original a cappella theme. This is a lovely group of singers and it was a good way to introduce them to the Evanston audience.

When the strings of the orchestra played the beautiful Williams piece after the chorus, it was apparent that Eckerling leads a corps of disciplined and cohesive string players. Solo parts were taken by long-time concertmaster Julian Arron, first violist Terese Parisoli and first cellist Mark Westbrook, who were singled out for recognition. On such a long program, it was good to hear a strings-only number.

Let's hear it for the devoted amateurs of the Evanston Symphony Orchestra!

ESO's next concert will be at 2:30 p.m. March 21, at Pick-Staiger in Evanston. Wendy Warner will play Dvorak's Cello Concerto. Call (847) 864-8804 or visit www.evanstonsymphony.org. The Chicago Chamber Choir will present “Grounded: Songs of Our Majestic Earth” at 3 p.m. April 18 at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, 1509 Ridge Ave., Evanston. Call (312) 409-6890 or visit ChicagoChamberChoir.org.