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Symphony conductor wows at the keyboard

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We know Larry Eckerling is an excellent conductor. Since taking the baton eight seasons ago, he has turned the once anemic Evanston Symphony Orchestra into a red-blooded community ensemble that can handle the classical repertoire with energy and skill.

What we also found out at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall on Sunday afternoon, May 8, is that he is one terrific pianist.

He concluded the final concert of the ESO's 65th season by serving as soloist in George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," while conducting from the keyboard.

The piano was turned to face the orchestra and the performance was a regular love fest. The audience was certainly with him, but even more important his musicians were too. With very few exceptions, they stayed with his tempo, even when he had only the nod of his head to lead them.

His solo passages, and there are many in this piece, were intensely personal. He freely stretched tempos, letting the composer's melodies linger. but just as often he compressed the lines, sending effervescent notes cascading down the keyboard.

During the luscious central theme the soloist and his orchestra played as one — glowing brass, piercing woodwinds and dreamy strings all coming together with a unity of purpose. Very few persons have the talent to be soloist and conductor simultaneously; the audience knew that and cheered their appreciation.

Eckerling favored us with an encore, a spirited solo of Gershwin's piece "Our Love is Here to Stay." He was even presented with flowers!

The Mother's Day program was packed with crowd-pleasers: Bernstein's Overture to "Candide," its jazzed rhythms played with rip-roaring speed; four selections from Grieg's "Peer Gynt Suite," including, of course, his bombastic "In the Hall of the Mountain King," which kept the percussion section jumping; and Copland's most American of orchestral works, "Appalachian Spring."

The lesser known "Merry Mount Suite," composed in 1938 by American composer Howard Hanson, a Northwestern University graduate, was played right after the Grieg, and there was a marked consonance between the two suites.

The Hanson commenced with deep rumbling pierced by golden brass and punctuated with gongs, timpani and

chimes.

A merry Children's Dance utilized the glockenspiel, and the Love Duet was full of passion. It was an altogether lovely piece, and I wonder why it is not played more often.

The orchestra delivered that sweetest of suites, Copland's "Appalachian Spring," in zesty style, but also gave the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts" a strong, reverent rendition.

The sold-out afternoon was community music-making at its finest. After 65 years, the Evanston Symphony Orchestra is younger than ever.

For information on the Evanston Symphony Orchestra's 66th season, call (847) 864-8804 or visit www.evanstonsymphony.org.

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