

Evanston Symphony Orchestra dazzled in season opener

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The 65th season of the Evanston Symphony Orchestra opened at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston Oct. 24 with an exceptionally youthful flair. The talented Lincoln Trio, faculty members and artists-in-residence at the Music Institute of Chicago in Winnetka, gave a dazzling performance of Beethoven's Concerto For Violin, Cello and Piano ("The Triple") and were rewarded with thunderous applause.

Violinist Desiree Ruhstrat, cellist David Cunliffe and pianist Marta Aznavoorian, who toured the State of Illinois for the Ravinia Festival during the Lincoln bicentennial year, made a beautiful appearance — Ruhstrat in a slim black evening gown, Aznavoorian in vivid pink floor length dress and Cunliffe in well-tailored business attire.

Their level of energy infused the orchestra, Ruhstrat absolutely igniting the symphony's ample and able string section. Beethoven frequently gave the opening lines of his melodies to the cello, which Cunliffe delivered as if he were singing. Aznavoorian commanded the Steinway, without neglecting the delicacy woven into the composer's intricate piano phrasing.

Since the three musicians are an ensemble, they wove their solo lines together with an easy grace born of being a unit and not just name-brand players brought together for a single appearance.

Conductor Lawrence Eckerling was fairly gleeful as the music moved from the soulful Largo to the vivid Rondo, each of the soloists displaying their individual virtuosity.

After the sustained applause, they gave an encore "Autumn" from "Four Seasons of Buenos Aires" by Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla. Packed with tango rhythms and lilting melodies, it was an unusual but pleasing choice.

The collaboration is a powerful example of what a community orchestra can do by showcasing the considerable talent that abounds right in our own back yard.

The afternoon opened with Brahms' perennially pleasing Academic Festival Overture and concluded with Tchaikovsky's grand Symphony No. 4, which shook the rafters of Pick-Staiger all the way up to the last row of the balcony.

The orchestra, with its long tradition, has been energized by Eckerling, now beginning his eighth season as music director. Its string sections are strong and polished and on Sunday its flutes sparkled and its woodwinds were superb, though there were several notable brass bloopers.

The orchestra's next concert will be Jan. 30 in a program featuring soprano Michelle Areyzaga, another fine talent who lives and works in the area.