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## Warmth and beauty from Evanston Symphony

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Orchestral fans certainly got their money's worth at the Evanston Symphony Orchestra the afternoon of Sunday, March 11.

The program included Symphony No. 7 by Sibelius; "Rainbow Body" by contemporary composer Christopher Theofanidis; "Lux Aeterna" by the amazing choral composer Morten Lauridsen, sung with orchestral accompaniment by the Chicago Chamber Chorale, and Smetana's "The Moldau."

By now it is clear that the Evanston Symphony, under the leadership of its music director Larry Eckerling, can handle the classics, adeptly navigate modern compositions and work successfully with choral groups. So the success of the afternoon was no surprise.

What was especially pleasing, however, was the warmth and beauty of the chosen selections. The smoothness of the orchestra's violins in the Sibelius, the depth of its brass and the flexibility and fervor of its winds gave the program a superior start. And the flowing music of Smetana's river brought the concert to a stirring conclusion.

"Rainbow Body" was based on a Marian chant by the Benedictine Abbess Hildegard of Bingen, who lived in the 12th century. Before it was played, several sopranos from the Chicago Chamber Chorale intoned the original.

The work opened with passages blending cello and flute, which gradually blossomed into an aural wreath, surrounding the ever upward modulation of the melody. The ending, with all the orchestral forces in play, was almost frightening in its intensity.

Program notes revealed that Theofanidis is among composers supported by Robert Spano and the Atlanta Symphony. Their mission is to write music in an understandable tonal setting. What a lovely piece of music Theofanidis created and how deftly the Evanston musicians articulated it for us.

Someone wrote of Morten Lauridsen that he wrote music "as if all the questions had been answered." It was certainly true of his "Lux Aeterna," or "Eternal Light" sung in Latin by the 40-voice Chicago Chamber Choir with orchestral accompaniment.

The choristers voices brought forth delicate clusters of dense harmonies, blended into an ethereal sound. It is a requiem, and each segment was a prayer for light, for mercy, and for rest. The music was more solemn than sad and more hopeful than tearful. The "Veni Sante Spiritus" overflowed with joy and consolation.

Eckerling sculpted the sound with his baton, the strings sustaining the powerful "Lux Perpetua" or "Perpetual Light" sung by the choir. It was an altogether glorious performance.

The concert was dedicated to the memory of violist and program annotator Lilius Circle, who joined the orchestra in 1960 and was a colleague of the ESO's late music director Frank Miller, principal cellist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Before coming to Chicago, Miller was principal cellist of the NBC Symphony under Arturo Toscanini.

After the "Lux Aeterna" Frank Miller's widow Shirley presented Eckerling with a baton that Toscanini had given to Miller when the orchestra disbanded in 1954. She presented it in recognition of the the high quality of performance that Eckerling has restored to the Evanston Symphony Orchestra since he became music director in 2003.

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