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ESO delivers in 66th opener

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What makes a successful orchestral concert? First, the music must have appeal, either as familiar favorites or exciting new material, plus more and more these days, a dazzling soloist must be the centerpiece of the event. Finally, the orchestra must be able to meet the challenges of the program,

The Evanston Symphony Orchestra satisfied all those requirements the afternoon of Oct. 22 at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall.

The program was pleasant indeed: Schubert's Symphony in B minor, ("Unfinished"), Liszt's First Piano Concerto, and Dvorak's Eighth Symphony.

The soloist, 17-year-old Colton Peltier, gave Liszt's concerto a stunning performance that brought the audience to its feet and later occasioned a line of autograph seekers, who just wanted a memento from this phenomenal pianist.

As for the ensemble, the Evanston Symphony Orchestra opened its 66th season as strong and vibrant as any community orchestra has a right to be. Under the baton of its music director Lawrence Eckerling, the players met the demands of the three major composers with concentration and skill. They sounded, in fact, as if they were at the end of their season, not the beginning.

In Schubert's Adagio, the horns were resonant, the cellos velvety and warm. Schubert, who wrote about 600 songs in his short lifetime, is about three things -- melody, melody, melody. And the orchestra dug into his flowing phrases and sweet harmonies with zest and care. The "Unfinished" has dark moments, which the ESO woodwinds delivered with subtlety.

The wow! factor was on display when Peltier played Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1. He is a slender lad who easily approached the heavy lifting required in this Liszt work.

Dexterity defined his flying fingers, but not all was bombast. Liszt has many dreamy interludes, and Peltier's upper register embellishments seemed like sparkling raindrops in a sunlit forest. This was the Liszt of "Liebestraum."

The tiny triangle over in the percussion section even received attention in this work, at one point engaging in a tete-a-tete with the piano. Then like a force of nature, the strings stormed as the piano thundered. From mood to mood, Peltier played with blazing brilliance. We wish him a brilliant future.

Dvorak's Eighth Symphony followed intermission and this inventive and melodic composer was an ideal choice to follow Liszt. The brass was especially powerful in this performance — strong, steady and on-pitch, which is not easily done.

Special applause is due principal flute Sherry Kujala for her consistently lovely playing, whether a dancing tune or a long, shining line of sound. Continuously cascading scales began with the violins and soon every section had a turn, repeating the downward run at fever pitch. Don Cagen and his team of trumpets sounded the grand finale with triumphant flair.

Dvorak paints with a broad, Romantic brush, and conductor Eckerling did not rush his music, letting it linger, first tenderly, then with a stirring intensity.

What makes a successful orchestral concert? Look no further than the Evanston Symphony Orchestra's first program in its 66th season.

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