

Midwest Young Artists

by: Michael Cameron

Pick-Staiger Concert Hall

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"Be Bold!" was the title given to Midwest Young Artist's Halloween night concert at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall at Northwestern University in Evanston. Like the young revelers roaming the streets outside, most of the students donned festive costumes. The treats heard by the audience were as tasty as any that wound up in the bags of the youngsters, and the non-traditional garb in no way detracted from the seriousness of purpose of the accomplished young musicians.

Four ensembles were represented, beginning with Gordon Jacob's "Old Wine in New Bottles" played by the Honors Wind Symphony under conductor James Ripley. Early One Morning shone with brightly colored lyrical tunes in the woodwinds, while The Wraggle Taggle Gypsies featured bagpipe-like drones and tunes redolent of the British isles. Next up were two movements from William Schumann's "New England Tryptych", beginning with fine brass solos and chorales in When Jesus Wept and ending with the stirring anthems and bustling figures in Chester.

Chris Madsen's Big Band then performed a trio of works that showcased finely-honed ensemble work and mature, imaginative solos. Tom Garling's "Coda" was tight and often cool understated, with a low register, ruminative guitar solo by Aaron Shapiro. Low pitches were again celebrated in Duke Ellington's "Self-Portrait of the Bean", a tribute to Coleman Hawkins and a fine solo vehicle for tenor saxophonist Jared Hochberg. Bassist Liam Coussens added deep, firmly grounded support. Edgar Sampson's "Stompin at the Savoy" (in a fine arrangement by Bill Holman) was the bold brassy finale of the set, highlighted by a number of fine soloists and a hard driving rhythm section.

Dr. Allan Dennis then took to the podium with his Concert Orchestra for two movements of Dvorak's Symphony No. 8 in G Major. The second movement (Adagio) boasted some lovely long legato lines, especially by the violins and woodwinds. The first movement (Allegro con brio) began with gracefully sculpted lyrical playing in the cellos, and progressed through passages of high-spirited brio.

"Bold" is certainly the best adjective to describe Dr. Dennis' choice of Bartok's "Concerto for Orchestra" as the final and central work of the program. By definition it showcases nearly every section in the orchestra, and any weak links in the ensemble are liable to be mercilessly exposed. But his Symphony Orchestra has tackled tough nuts in the orchestra canon before, and they were eager to show that they were up to the challenge.

The opening measures of the Introduzione featured ominous and note-perfect long tones in the low strings, alternating with thrilling outbursts from their higher relatives. Complex metric changes were handled by Dennis and his forces with utter assurance. The "concerto" of the title is nowhere more apparent than in the bristling duos of the second movement, Giuco delle coppie. The sonorous brass chorales were warm, polished, and precisely balanced, evidence that "virtuosity" is an asset just as

critical in ensemble playing as in solo work. The Elogia exuded a haunting quality perfectly appropriate to the occasion. The Finale was robust, delightfully playful, and swiftly paced, with climaxes that were hair-raising but never strident. Picking the strongest soloists for special mention is an exercise in futility, but a few of the standouts included trombonist Michael Cox, clarinetist Sam Matteson, oboist Ian Daugherty, and flutist Evan Fotjik.