

Be Heroic!
Midwest Young Artists Symphony Orchestra
Dr. Allan Dennis, conductor
May 1 – Pick-Staiger Concert Hall
Mathieu Dufour, flute

Michael Cameron

Midwest Young Artists' Symphony Orchestra concerts have been notable for the inclusion of repertoire that is generally the purview of professional ensembles and highly-ranked institutions of higher education. Debussy's *La Mer* and Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra* were two particularly memorable examples of MYA's splendid young musicians tackling challenging music with finesse and technical acumen well beyond recognized standards for youth orchestras.

Sunday's concert at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston by conductor Dr. Allan Dennis and company featured Richard Strauss' titanic *Ein Heldenleben*, a tour de force of lush complexity, brute stamina and sheer fire power that has brought many a great orchestra to its knees. As in Bartok's *Concerto*, the piece can't easily survive weaknesses in any of the instrumental groups, and once again MYA's depth of talent and Dr. Allan Dennis' inspired leadership combined for a powerful, sweeping reading of the composer's quasi-autobiographical tone poem.

The audience no doubt appreciated Dr. Dennis' program notes as well as the display of numbers corresponding to the progression of sections in this highly detailed programmatic score. From the soaring cascades of the opening string figures to the resplendent wind choirs, the opening section ("The Hero") was notable for its propulsive drive and visceral sonic impact. The woodwinds had plenty of fun with their bristling, rude interjections, and an off-stage trio of trumpets gave a vigorous call-to-arms. The majestic French horn quotation of *Don Juan* was stirring, while the bassoon and English horn excelled in the transformation of the opening theme to a prayer for peace.

Special kudos to concertmaster Amy Pickler for her exemplary playing in extended solo passages that are as demanding as many violin concertos. Not only are the physical requirements daunting, but the violinist is required to flip moods on a dime, a challenge she negotiated effortlessly. The orchestra also received a boost from the splendid solo efforts of principal horn player Zach Popp.

The piece is infamous for rapid-fire modulations and extensive chromaticism, yet none of these complications interfered with an utterly convincing performance. Most impressive was the sheer energy and commitment brought to a work that most in the orchestra were playing for the first time in their careers. Strauss' tone poem is a monument to self-confidence and ambition, and the MYA musicians showed that these attributes are also valuable qualities in the performers themselves.

If *Ein Heldenleben* is a masterful and exhaustive celebration of the ego of it's creator, the other piece on the program is noteworthy for its clarity and succinctness. It

would be hard to imagine an artist better equipped to play the Ibert's *Flute Concerto* as fluidly and idiomatically as Chicago Symphony Orchestra principal flutist Mathieu Dufour. The Paris native has a direct lineage to the culture that produced this lean and lucid staple of the flute repertoire, and his crystalline, unforced virtuosity are tailor-made for Ibert's sparkling masterwork.

Dufour's full, bright sound and flawless technique were evident from the opening bars, and every section was delivered with a natural flow that unerringly suited the concerto's airy and gently humorous style. Every measure was perfectly groomed with pinpoint accuracy and astonishing breath control. The reduced orchestra provided a dependable cushion of support, always staying under the soloist, and easily negotiating the finale's mixed meters.

The audience was completely won over by the performances of both soloist and orchestra. The students will long carry with them the memory of their collaboration with a world-class soloist and a first exposure to one of music's most potent and enduring creations.