

Midwest Young Artists
"Discover Brilliance"

Honors Wind Symphony - James Ripley, conductor
Big Band - Chris Madsen, director
Symphony Orchestra - Allan Dennis, conductor

Pick-Staiger Concert Hall
Evanston

This is getting to be a habit.

Sunday at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston (under the heading "Discover Brilliance"), Dr. Allan Dennis led the Midwest Young Artists Symphony Orchestra in an orchestral warhorse of grand proportions that showcased a level of polished nuance, technical skill, and a degree of artistic maturity that is hard to over-praise in such young personnel. Other works tackled by Dennis and company in earlier concerts include Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra*, Debussy's *La Mer*, Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben*, extremely challenging works all, but none that require the solo fire-power of Rimsky-Korsakov's monumental *Scheherazade*.

The Russian composer quite literally wrote the book on orchestration (his textbook on the subject has been required reading for composers for a century and counting), and his works have been models for Stravinsky, Debussy, Prokofiev, and Ravel, among countless others. Though the subject of *Scheherazade* is based on Arabian tales, the work is still firmly Russian in its sensibilities and its flavor of "oriental" sound. Rimsky-Korsakov himself wrote that the piece was not meant to be an exact depiction of Scheherazade's stories, and titles of the movements are meant to "direct but slightly the hearer's fancy on the path my own fancy traveled." When vivid, color-saturated readings such as MYA's take flight, this lack of specificity in the program allows the imagination to soar freely.

In addition to all of the usual challenges associated with orchestral behemoths, *Scheherazade* makes special demands on the principals, with many passages sounding briefly like mini-concertos. This is a tall order indeed for students in their mid-teens, yet one-by-one they tackled each solo with skill and confidence, painting a kaleidoscopic portrait of each character and their corresponding action scenes.

The unison and *fortissimo* proclamation that opened the performance was a vivid depiction of the brutality of the Sultan. Fairy-tale chords in soft woodwinds lead to the seductive violin-voice of *Scheherazade* herself, played with alluring charm by concertmaster Jorie Butler-Geyer. Solo passages by principal cellist Ben Solomonow were equally compelling.

One of Rimsky-Korsakov's most imaginative orchestral inventions was a clarinet recitative over the unmeasured strumming of plucked strings, and clarinetist Theo Mavrakis injected the famous line with bracing energy and entrancing nuance. Other highlights of the middle movements were the evocative solos of bassoonist Julia Payne and oboist Tamara Winston. In the finale Dennis elicited spine-tingling climaxes from

entire ensemble, most notably the full-blooded violins, soulful cellos and snappy percussion.

Several other fine ensembles also had a chance to demonstrate their accomplishments earlier in the day. The Honors Wind Symphony under the direction of James Ripley delivered a lively account of the *Scherzo all Marcia* from Ralph Vaughan Williams' Symphony No. 8, as well as the *adagio* from the same composer's *Concerto Grosso*, notable for its sensitive lyrical reading and impressive breath control from the fine solo woodwind players. The clarinets were in especially good form in Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Rheinische Kirmestänze*, a short ditty brimming with humor and tight rhythmic precision.

Chris Madsen and his Big Band then took to the stage with the director's own *With Gratitude*, a work that was commissioned by Illinois Music Educator's Association to be the 2012 All-State jazz audition piece. Countless budding jazz players are working on the delightful piece this fall, but it's doubtful any accounts will match the driving performance given by Madsen himself with his MYA band. The three terrific soloists were Aidan Lombard, Peter Gabrielides, and Maddie Vogler on trumpet, guitar, and alto sax respectively.

Duke Ellington's "Blue Serge" received rousing and full-blooded treatment, thanks to solos from Simon Giavaras, Patrick Stineman, and Jared Hochberg (trombone, piano, tenor sax). Baritone saxophone soloist Tyler Sierzega took center stage in growling and raucous version of Gerry Mulligan's *Out Back of the Barn*. Additional soloist were guitarist Karsten Neumeister and trombonist Andy Peterman.

Madsen also announced that the Big Band was accepted as guest artists for the Midwest Clinic at the McCormick Place in December. A high honor indeed, and richly deserved.

Michael Cameron