

OPINION

Uplifting symphony music can be heard in N'West Iowa

Northwest Iowa Symphony Orchestra presented its first concert of the season to a large and appreciative audience Tuesday evening in Sioux Center in spite of it being Election Night.

In what could be considered a brilliant marketing ploy, the organization took the Election Day excitement one step further by playing an "All-American" musical program. Included in the two-hour performance were pieces by motion picture composer Morton Gould, Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, John Philip Sousa and the organization's conductor Christopher Stanichar.

I have to admit it. I'm consistently impressed with the quality of this regional orchestra made up of committed, talented individuals of all ages, including some in their retirement years down to a handful of high school students.

Many of the 80 members travel great distances to attend the group's practice sessions and performances. Some of them are professional band and orchestra instructors,



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teaching in colleges or school systems as far away as Sioux City, Vermillion, SD, and Sioux Falls, SD. Each concert is performed at least twice: that afternoon for area public school students and during the evening for NISO members and guests.

Tuesday evening's program opened with "Variations on 'America'" by William Schuman. Originally written in 1891 for organ, the piece depended heavily on the string bass and brass sections to provide the heavy moodiness and many sudden discords and unusual twists in musical form.

That selection was followed by a wonderful World War II suite titled "American Salute" by Gould. Built around the famous Civil War selection, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," it showcased almost every section of the orchestra in a fluid presentation of wonderfully forceful music.

The first half of the concert concluded with "Independence Overture," an original 12-minute overture written by Stanichar for the Omaha Symphony Orchestra in 2007. Alive with soaring, uplifting melodies, it is an exciting musical piece that traces the notes of a single instrument as they are multiplied through the entire organization. The notes represent, according to the composer, the movement of an idea or positive spirit from one individual throughout an entire community.

During the intermission, or halftime, as Norma Snyder Jones, chairperson of the NISO board called it, I took time to introduce myself to John Casey of Sioux Falls, the orchestra's principle string bassist who

additionally teaches string bass at Dordt College. Casey was brought to my attention by my nephew, Chris Wagner, while Connie and I were in Switzerland recently. Chris, who played string bass for a number of years with Swiss and other European orchestras, remembered playing beside Casey while both were students in the orchestra at Northwestern University in Chicago. My wife and I had the opportunity to hear Chris play for the first time while staying in his home in Switzerland.

"Chris is a very talented individual," Casey shared with me during our short conversation. "What he didn't tell you was that we were music stand partners while in college. He was a freshman and I was a graduate student. But despite my being the older one, he was first chair while I was second for our stand."

The second half of the evening program kicked off with "Four Dance Episodes from 'Rodeo'" by Copland. Included in it is the famous "Hoe-Down" which has become most familiar as the background music

for the television commercials for "Beef, it's what's for dinner." Stanichar really got into the excitement of that fast-paced piece by placing a big, black cowboy hat on his head.

Then came the highlight of the evening: Gershwin's "American Rhapsody," later renamed "Rhapsody in Blue."

Gershwin, it often is told, had forgotten he'd promised jazz orchestra leader Paul Whiteman that he'd compose and perform the piece until just days before the scheduled preview. Not able to score all of it in the limited time available, the composer provided Whiteman with just the orchestration, saying he would improvise the piano solos.

It was the final piece of a long, drawn-out evening when premiered, but is reported to have brought the audience to life with its memorable melody, constant shifts in tempo and sudden crescendos. The solo piano was perfectly executed by Ksenia Nosikova, the evening's guest artist.

It was a wonderful evening of music that ended with an appropriate encore: "The Stars

and Stripes Forever" complete with an Uncle Sam's hat on the head of the conductor and enthusiastic clapping by members of the audience.

N'West Iowa is fortunate to have such a fine symphony right in our four-county area. I only wish more individuals would set aside the time to attend the concerts. Those who haven't done so don't know what they are missing.

As you can see from this review the emphasis is on good music not an endless presentation of heavy, sometimes difficult to understand or unappreciated classical material.

The next program, "A Night at the Movies," is scheduled for Saturday evening, Feb. 2. Do your family a favor and make plans now to attend. You'll find it to be an inexpensive investment for the value received and a wonderful introduction to truly great entertainment.

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