

NISO kicks off season with an exceptional concert

A larger-than-usual audience showed up Tuesday evening at Dordt College in Sioux Center for the Northwest Iowa Symphony Orchestra's colorful and rewarding opening concert.

The orchestra, often referred to as NISO, is celebrating its 30th anniversary this season with a series of concerts titled "Musical Gems." The classical selections presented during Tuesday's performance, under the common theme "Here's the Story," definitely met all expectations that came with both titles.

It is no secret that Connie and I are NISO enthusiasts. We believe Northwest Iowa is blessed to have such an excellent classical orchestra within easy driving distance. And we greatly appreciate all the musicians, from high school age to senior citizens, who commit themselves to the hours of practice and performance time each year. Many drive great distances, from as far away as Sioux Falls and Vermillion, SD, to boost the professionalism of the organization as well as the quality of the performance. Christopher Stanichar provides excellent musical direction as



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PUBLISHER

the principal conductor and the regional board of directors somehow find the dollars and energy to support the small but committed management staff.

Tuesday's concert opened with Bedřich Smetana's "The Moldau."

I remember my grade-school years growing up with my college-age older brother, Robert. Bob loved classical music and often played a recording of "The Moldau" early in the mornings as we prepared to head off for school.

Bob took the time during those mornings to explain the meaning of each movement and the exact imagery shared in the music. I fell in love with the reoccurring theme that represented the Vltava or Moldau River as it flowed from somewhere above Prague through Bohemia to the sea below. From the opening

notes of two flutes representing the bubbling creation of a stream to the crashing sounds of a massive river pounding through demanding rapids, the tone poem paints wonderful visual images: hunters in the forest, a happy wedding celebration and the quiet meadows at night. I've always appreciated how Bob made me aware of the beauty of classical music.

I am not a trained musician and can only compare Tuesday's performance to my favorite CD recordings of the piece. But to my untrained ear it was perfect. I am always amazed at the depth of NISO's brass and woodwind sections. There seem to be so few of them compared to the many members in the string sections but they rise to meet every musical challenge.

I have to admit I wasn't looking forward to the evening's second selection. I am not usually impressed with more recently written classical-style music. But I was both surprised and delighted by "In Good King Charles's Golden Days." Written by Iowa composer Linda Robbins Coleman for the revival of a George Ber-

nard Show play, it was bright, happy and most pleasing and an exciting demonstration of the range of the orchestra. I especially enjoyed watching the percussion section effortlessly respond to covering many different instruments during this and later selections.

NISO has the ability to recruit many talented soloists for their various concerts. Tuesday night the guest was John Bailey, a professor of music and flutist with the Moran Woodwind Quartet at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Glenn Korff School of Music.

Bailey closed the first half of the evening's musical story telling with "Themes" from the opera "Carmen."

The choice was excellent. The music from "Carmen" is familiar to almost everyone and Bailey's pure and often powerful performance, backed by the full orchestra, presented a wonderful and fresh interpretation of traditionally sung arias.

Following the intermission, the concert climaxed with a rousing presentation of Ferde Grofé's "Grand Canyon Suite."

Written late in the 1920s,

the lengthy suite is just one of Grofé's tributes to America's landmarks. But it stands out above all others as his best and most famous composition.

I always enjoy the opening first movement titled "At Dawn." The orchestra built beautifully from the early chirping of birds to the explosive fullness of a new day. Connie, in contrast, said she especially enjoyed the fourth movement, "Sunset."

But it is the expressive third movement, "On the Trail," with the clip clopping of the mule train that is most familiar. Concert mistress Lisa Miederna of Sioux Center kept us on the very edge of our seats with her exquisite playing of the lengthy opening stanzas. The calling, mournful violin solo beautifully prepared us for all the emotional, colorful, moments to follow.

The Northwest Iowa Symphony Orchestra does more than just bring culture to a mostly adult audience three times a year. This past Tuesday afternoon it also shared the joy and wonderful of classical music with numerous fourth-grade classes from across Northwest Iowa. I only hope the

children privileged to attend that concert learn the love of classical music like I did from my brother so many years ago.

As always, the evening was most enjoyable. The selection and presentation made the time fly by way too fast. I did miss conductor Stanichar's usual verbal comments on the background of the selections, composers and parts performed by various sections of the orchestra.

There still are two concerts left during the current season. The Winter Pops concert will be presented at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 25, and the Spring Concert — celebrating 30 years — is scheduled for Tuesday, April 11. That special celebration concert will start at 7 p.m., one-half hour earlier than the normal 7:30 time.

For those wanting more, NISO annually sponsors a guest concert. This year it features the Lark Quartet and will be presented Saturday, Feb. 4.

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