



BELLA HRISTOVA, *violinist*



Altoona Mirror

ASO opens season with great concert

By Timothy Melbinger

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The Altoona Symphony Orchestra began its 82nd season Saturday night at the Mishler Theatre in Altoona, its third year with conductor Teresa Cheung at the podium.

She has titled the season “Musical Escapes”, with this night of music taking the audience to Vienna for an impressive program of Haydn and Brahms. Though he was the inventor of symphonic form in the second half of the 18th century, Joseph Haydn remains underappreciated compared to Mozart and Beethoven. Cheung selected the bristling energy of his Symphony No. 101 to open the evening. The work features the string section, which did not fail to rise to the occasion. The violins skillfully executed both the frolicsome melody of the first movement and the graceful melody of the slow movement. They would perform a pastoral accompaniment to flutist Diane Gould Toulson’s solo in the third movement.

The late Romantic-era master Johannes Brahms wrote a set of variations to a theme by Haydn – the scope of which makes it a real orchestral showpiece. We heard the entire wind section present the restrained theme first. The following eight variations covered many emotional states in both broad sweeps and refined elegance. Cheung tempered the pacing of the conclusion so as to reach the glorious return of the theme at just the right time.

The highlight of the evening was the guest artist violinist Bella Hristova, who played the solo part of Brahms’ Concerto for Violin. The Bulgarian-born Hristova is still young (she is 25), yet she played the virtuosic part as if she had known it for decades.

Brahms’ seemed to include all of the disparate emotions of the variations in the expansive first movement, from the lyric beginning to the fiery entrance of the soloist. A duet in the second movement with oboist Lenny Young provided the main theme over which Hristova would soon soar. The precision with which she articulated her highest notes in the slow movement was as breathtaking as the speed with which she produced arpeggios and double-stops in the faster third movement.

It was a pleasure to watch Cheung direct the give and take between the rustic and vibrant accompaniment in the orchestra and the soloist’s exuberant final gestures.

Hristova noted that she enjoyed working with Cheung and that the Mishler “has both; it looks beautiful and has wonderful reverberation.” The audience was lucky to hear such a budding young talent before she only plays in front of the world’s best-known orchestras.