



Bella Hristova, violinist



A new idea for a concert and a brand new work energize the ECSO

-Milton Moore | The Day (Connecticut) | November 23, 2014

Eastern Connecticut Symphony Orchestra Music Director Toshi Shimada concocted a concept for Saturday night's concert that was intentionally crowd-pleasing. It was both strange and wonderful – and pretty irresistible.

But Saturday's concert also had a very different atmosphere. For starters, the orchestra dressed more casually, with both men and women wearing black shirts and slacks, and Shimada not only pointed that out, he told the men in the audience to loosen their ties and get comfortable.

The audience clearly enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere and the musical variety, which ranged from well-known and oft-requested to a brand new commissioned work by Brooklyn-based musical polyglot William Brittelle, a piece entitled *The Canyons Curved Burgundy* that incorporated a pair of synthesizers, computer samples set into drum pads and a fine performance by singer/electric guitarist Aaron Roche.

The other star of the evening was Bulgarian violinist Bella Hristova, who was front and center for two contrasting works: Dvorak's long-lined and charming *Romance for Violin and Orchestra* and Ravel's fierce technical showpiece, his *Tzigane for Violin and Orchestra*. In both, Hristova played with a distinctive voice, a suave certainty and a creamy timbre that was without sharp edges, even in the spikey gypsy attack of the Ravel.

The 1924 *Tzigane* gave her the opportunity to wow the audience with a smorgasbord of bowing techniques, singing stops, harmonics and a blizzard of sixteenth notes for a finale. She made it seem almost too easy, but great fun was had by all.

The first half ended with one of the most requested works, Smetana's *The Moldau*, a tone poem depicting the beloved river of his Bohemian home. The opening with flutists Nancy Chaput and Clare Nielsen swirling eddies of sound as the bass strings carried the ensemble forward to the majestic main theme and later the excellent horn quartet over muted violins were memorable moments.

The program concluded with Ravel's 1920 *La valse*, that infectious, often grotesque waltz that felt as if it were built from shards of wreckage, like a reconstructed jetliner. The craziness was infectious, and Shimada was at times dancing and at times wildly stabbing cues as the crescendos erupted.

It was a wild and crazy finale, full of startling sforzandos and decomposing dissonances that made the idea of a singer with and electric guitar as part of the orchestra seem not that weird at all.