

Symphony opens season with “mixed bag”

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The 53rd season of the Waterloo-Cedar Falls Symphony Orchestra was launched Friday night with the first of a pair of subscription concerts in Kersenbrock Auditorium, West High School. The large crowd in attendance appeared to like the music they heard on a program that was a very mixed bag.

This first pair of concerts was dedicated to Billy G. Jenner, the prominent Waterloo civic leader who died this summer. Jenner was a widely beloved figure who had been president of the Symphony and who actually had much to do with the orchestra's present success. Many of us remember the enthusiasm with which Billy guided the orchestra's affairs during his term of office. Interested in every aspect of the life of the orchestra, he even attended rehearsals, which he enjoyed with the same devotion that avid sports fans watch their favorite team work out.

In addition to the concert dedication the orchestra honored Jenner by playing, as its opening number, Bach's Air for the G. String, taken from the Suite No. 3, in D Major. This majestic melody is an appropriate piece with which to memorialize an esteemed friend or hero. (I recall that the Boston Symphony Orchestra's string section played this piece at the funeral, at the graveside, in fact, of Serge Koussevitzky, the great conductor.)

THROUGHOUT, THE music is solemn and stately, full of sadness, yet with a beauty and sublimity that proclaim confidence in life's significance, and in the continued existence of the human soul.

That the music effectively spoke to the audience was evidenced by the solemn silence which followed its playing.

(It should not be overlooked that Maestro Giunta has written a most eloquent memoir about his friend, Jenner, which appears in Bravo, the program magazine of the orchestra.) Rimsky-Korsakoff's well-known Scheherazade was the major piece on the first half of the program. Something of an old war horse, this Symphonic Suite can provide a pleasing musical experience, for it is filled with opportunities for virtuoso playing by almost every section of the orchestra.

The brass gets an especially vigorous workout with stirring fanfares, sonorous lyrical passages, and delightful exchanges between trombones and trumpets. Jon Hansen and Keith Johnson and their respective sections gave an excellent account of themselves here. The woodwind parts were, by and large, also well executed, particularly the prominent melody given to the clarinet, played by Jack Graham.

BUT THE premier performance was that of Concertmaster Visile Beluska. The solo violin part, which likely represents the Princess herself, is hauntingly beautiful and recurs in all four movements. Beluska played it with flawless grace. His sweet and delicate tone and accuracy of pitch, particularly on the difficult pianissimo high notes, deserve the highest praise.

It was a pleasure to hear the Symphony play this remarkable piece of music with its demanding orchestration. Yet, to be honest, the orchestra as a whole did not sound as good as it has in past performances. Maestro Giunta's interpretation demonstrated his sensitivity to the score and his awareness that precision is of the utmost importance in this music. But the orchestra appeared to lack certainty. Transitions were rough. Cues were missed. Of course, this was only the first concert of the new season, and it always takes some time to re-establish the coherence of a musical ensemble.

After the intermission the entire program was devoted to a series of songs sung by Gordon MacRae, the famous star of Hollywood and Broadway. The orchestra was led by Gordon Munford, and associate of MacRae's. Most of the numbers were old favorites (like "Oh What a Beautiful Morning"), and were much appreciated by the audience.

A couple of the numbers were quite satisfying. "Gigi" and the encore "My Way." They were sung with real feeling and vocal accuracy. But, in the main, MacRae's performance was something less than electric. He talked his way through some of the most lyrical of songs. He

revised, and thus ruined, the melodies of some fine selections. He seemed tired, or bored, as if he had done it all too many times before. Yet, he apparently pleased a large number of people, for many were on their feet, applauding at the conclusion of the concert.

THE SYMPHONY, under the directions of Munford's competent professional direction played the accompaniments with splendid energy and enthusiasm. Their playing of "Tomorrow" (from "Annie") may well have been the high point of the second half of the evening's program.

This year, for the first time, the Symphony has scheduled six pairs of subscription concerts. Without a doubt, this is going to be an outstanding season, with some distinguished musical performances we can all look forward to with happy anticipation.