

Symphony wraps up season on high note

By Patricia Wetzel / Special to the Times

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The final concert of the El Paso Symphony Orchestra's 2007-08 season, under the direction of Maestra Sarah Ioannides, was a glorious combination of well-known romantic favorites, a virtuosic harp performance and the American premiere of a groundbreaking new work.

With perhaps one of the most celebrated solo passages in orchestral literature, flutist Melissa Colgin-Abeln masterfully introduced the opening of Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" with the familiar dreamy melody.

The theme then traveled through the wind principals who all provided magnificent renderings. Ioannides delivered a passionately felt presentation that was filled with colorful crescendos and the delicate rising and falling of instrumentation. It was a lush and expressive performance.

The French influence continued with the Concerto for Harp and Orchestra in C by French harpist and composer Henriette Renie. The audience was treated to a virtuosic performance by the dashing young French harpist, Emmanuel Ceysson.

After a brief opening by the orchestra, Ceysson took command and the audience became spellbound. So rarely does one have the

opportunity to hear solo harp, and Ceysson's brilliant performance was captivating.

The first movement came to an invigorating close with fine accompaniment provided by the orchestra, despite limited rehearsal time with the soloist.

The second movement opened beautifully with solo harp, followed by a delicate reply of the strings and winds.

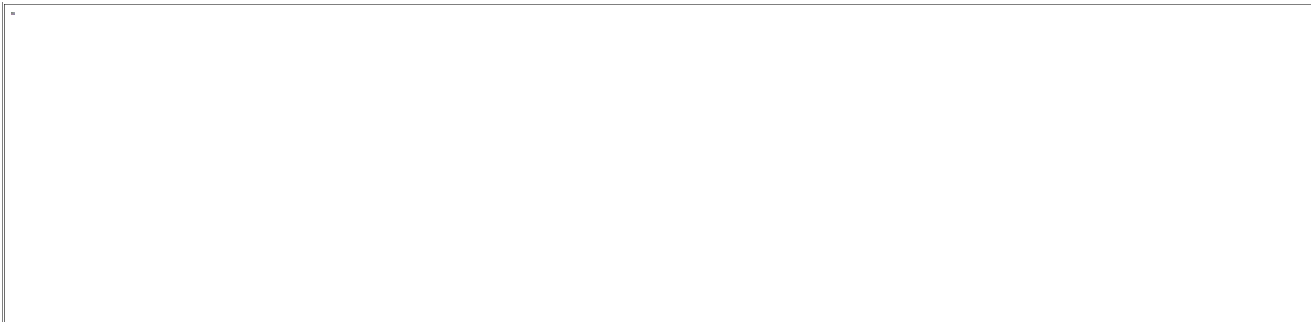
The energetic third movement was a display of Ceysson's crisp proficiency and the final movement, finishing with a flourish, was truly virtuosic and brought the audience immediately to its feet.

Ceysson treated the audience to an ethereal encore, "Au Matin" by Marcel Tournier, that was a brilliant conclusion to a heavenly performance.

The second half of the program began with the United States premiere of "Open Ground," a 2006 work by Russian-born composer Victoria Borisova-Ollas. The composer was inspired by Salman Rushdie's novel "The Ground Beneath Her Feet." While her inspiration may have a specific origin, the composer insists that the interpretation of her composition is left entirely open to "whatever the listener hears."

The opening, con moto, began in the strings, becoming whimsical with the addition of the winds and eventually progressed to a full, driving majesty, which finally wound down to a near-stillness, evoking a sense of falling.

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In the piu mosso section the light, spirited winds were deftly accompanied by an understated frenzy in the strings. A triumphant trumpet fanfare was introduced and echoed in the low brass. Borisova-Ollas is obviously fond of percussion and employs the full spectrum of the section to great success throughout. Ioannides infused the orchestra with an exuberance that carried it to an intense and tumultuous pinnacle that gave way to a brass requiem.

Finally, as subtly as it began, the piece delicately faded away to the celestial strains of harp, percussion and winds.

"Open Ground" is a dazzling, inspired composition that was skillfully performed under Maestra Ioannides' direction and greatly appreciated by the audience who rewarded the maestra and composer Borisova-Ollas with a standing ovation.

The program concluded with Ravel's "La Valse," a musical depiction of Vienna in its glorious years, albeit a slightly unconventional presentation of the classic waltz.

Ioannides created a symbiosis with the orchestra such that they were one dynamic, fluid organism as they moved toward the climax of the piece.

Once again, the percussion provided notable punctuation and the audience appreciated wonderful performances by the winds and brass. It was an outstanding performance, full of statement and nuance and elicited a vigorous ovation from the audience.

As Ioannides returned to the podium, a hush fell over the theater. When the opening strains of the encore, Ravel's "Bolero," were heard by the audience, a collective squeal of delight went up. Ioannides and the El Paso Symphony Orchestra offered a dazzling conclusion to the concert and to the season.

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