

MUSIC REVIEW: UNIVERSITY ORCHESTRA AND WYCIK

Guest conductor reveals why he must come back again and again

By Peter Jacobi

H-T Reviewer | pjacobi@heraldt.com

The new face was that of Ekhart Wycik, who makes his living in the Rhineland area as associate general music director and principal conductor of the Dortmund Opera Theater and faculty member at both the University of Music in Cologne and the Robert Schumann University of Music in Dusseldorf.

On Wednesday evening, the face and body and mind of that gentleman took the podium in the Musical Arts Center to lead the University Orchestra in a refreshing program that from the opening downbeat revealed a genuine talent. Here was a conductor who clearly made his wishes known in body language and technique, conveying to his young musicians what he wanted from them. He had obviously done that during rehearsals, with a result of readings that not only sparkled with precision and transparency but that boldly exuded character.

Without intermission, Maestro Wycik offered two 19th century staples by Brahms and Smetana and, between them, a work by IU's Don Freund. Each item emerged with its individuality articulated and accentuated.

He opened with the rousing Academic Festival Overture, Brahms' musical gift to the University of Breslau for giving him an honorary degree. What had been expected by tradition was a dignified composition. What Brahms wrote was an overture developed around four student drinking songs. The German-born Wycik injected Wednesday's performance with every drop of old world collegial spirit. It had that musical essence which comes as birthright to someone reared and trained in middle Europe. The conductor had the gift to pass along his insight so that the orchestra seemed interpretively at one with him.

Freund's "Word on the Street" is as American as the Brahms is German, a niftily crafted orchestral exercise seasoned with the blues and rock as well as classic elements, all harmonically accessible and rhythmically inviting. This music might not have been second nature to Wycik, but one never would have known. He fashioned its performance with sensitivity to composer intent and an enthusiasm that appeared to embrace the music's stylistic attributes and atmospheric exuberance.

Brahms and Freund, on this night, were warm-ups for three of the six symphonic poems Smetana wrote and combined to honor "Ma Vlast" ("My Country"). The best known of those six was among the chosen, a musical journey down "The Moldau." Though actually the second of the poems, Wycik chose to place at the end of the concert this evocative depiction of a waterway flowing and drifting through the Czech countryside and Prague.

He preceded it with "The High Castle," a tonal painting mystic and majestic, and the gorgeous "From Bohemia's woods and fields," with music so invitingly spacious and open. Was ever a more loving musical tribute paid to a composer's homeland? Conductor Wycik and the University Orchestra treated "Ma Vlast" as lovingly as it should have been. The performance was simply beautiful.

Newcomer Wycik needs to come back.