

## Review: Spartanburg Philharmonic embraces change, thrives artistically

By CHRIS VANEMAN

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When arts organizations get together at conferences and such these days, the mantra is the same all across the country: change or die. Orchestras and similar groups can no longer remain haughtily aloof from their communities or offer strictly traditional, 19th Century-style concert going experiences, secure in the knowledge that a few wealthy donors will bail them out by writing blank checks at the end of each year.



Mimi Stillman performed with the Spartanburg Philharmonic Orchestra on Saturday night.

The Spartanburg Philharmonic has embraced change and seems to be thriving artistically, if recent concerts are any guide. If the Philharmonic's Sept. 11 concert exhibited a deepened relationship with the broader community, Saturday evening's concert displayed a willingness to rethink the concert going experience, as well.

While Saturday's concert program was traditional enough on paper (a genial late 18th-Century symphony, a colorful and appealing early 20th-Century orchestral showpiece, and two works featuring a brilliant and appealing guest soloist), its execution offered an innovation sure to appeal to families and younger concertgoers: a Jumbotron!

Well, not a Jumbotron, exactly. (Jumbotrons, for those who haven't been to a Carolina Panthers game lately, are the huge video screens that display the game as seen from varied camera angles at pro sports events.) But a large video screen hung behind the orchestra, and throughout the audience saw an intricately-intercut projection of the concert as viewed by four cameras, two of them on stage and two off.

Thus even audiences in the balcony were treated to clear, close-up views of Music Director Sarah Ioannides' gestures and expressions, of the various woodwind and brass instruments and their players, and of the terrifically impressive guest soloist, flutist and piccoloist Mimi Stillman.

The concert began with a lively rendition of the last of Joseph Haydn's 104 symphonies. Haydn can too often seem a little prissy in performance, but Ioannides and the SPO wisely decided on a vigorous approach, bringing out the Symphony's folk song influences.

Guest artist Stillman then joined the group, piccolo in hand, to play a concerto for

that instrument by Antonio Vivaldi. Most flutists also play piccolo, but do so with more than a little trepidation, feeling that the little instrument, so apparently unassuming, will turn on them in a heartbeat and betray them faster than a gorgeous brunette in a 1940s detective movie. Stillman displayed only the tiniest amount of nervousness as she tackled the virtuosic outer movements of the concerto with fearless tempos and irresistible soloistic élan. It was the central slow movement in which she truly shone, however, tapering phrases exquisitely and adding lovely, partially-improvised ornaments to the simple melody Vivaldi supplies the soloist.

Stillman returned after the intermission for a brilliant, take-no-prisoners account of Francois Borne's fantasy on themes from Bizet's opera Carmen. As in the Vivaldi, the audience benefited from the video screen's close-ups of Stillman as she sailed dazzlingly through the piece's multi fold challenges.

The concert concluded with Zoltan Kodály's Dances from Galanta, an orchestral fantasy inspired by Hungarian folk music. Here the orchestra's continuing artistic development under Ioannides' baton was most apparent: a rich low-string sonority, a succession of stylish woodwind solos (especially the cadenza played by the SPO's excellent principal clarinetist, Karen Hill), generally fine intonation, and (apart from some minor disagreements among sections as to the placement of a few upbeats) good ensemble work.

Here also was when the video screen was at its most useful for many audience members, as it was able to provide up-close views of each of the instrumentalists who was playing a prominent part at the moment. While the most experienced concertgoers may occasionally find such technology distracting (music-induced reverie being easily broken by a quick change in visuals), there can be no question that it's very welcome for most audiences. The orchestra, which had formerly been an anonymous, black-clad mass, is now a collection of individuals, and colorful sounds can be much more easily associated with the instruments that are making them.

The screen is also the latest tool in the SPO's long-term efforts to be family- and kid-friendly, an issue dear to the heart of Ioannides, who has three small ones of her own. These efforts, which have also taken the form of 7 p.m. start times and the orchestra's Big Red Ticket program with county schools, took Stillman into three area schools (Dorman High, Dawkins Middle, and the Montessori School), where she played and spoke. They paid off in a large, enthusiastic, and varied audience – proof that, in Spartanburg, at least, change is healthy, and the great classical tradition is taking root in a new generation of younger Americans.

Chris Vaneman is associate professor of flute and musicology at Converse College.

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