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## Ioannides leads CSO through superb performance, impressive program

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**Tom Di Nardo** | Guest Reviewer

For Tuesday evening's



The Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra performs under the baton of guest conductor Sarah Ioannides Tuesday evening in the Amphitheater. Photo by [Adam Birkan](#).

Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra concert, conductor Sarah Ioannides chose works defined by extremely varied rhythmic structures — urgently forceful in Gershwin, throbbing and shifting-repetitive in Piazzolla, supple and pliant for Debussy and subtly tricky in Dukas.

Ioannides, making her Chautauqua debut, boasts a remarkable background. Born in Australia, she grew up in England where she began her musical training at Oxford University and the prestigious Guildhall School. She soon received a Fulbright

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Scholarship to study with Otto-Werner Mueller both at the Curtis Institute of Music and at The Juilliard School, eventually becoming his assistant conductor. Her many awards include those from the Bruno Walter Foundation and the JoAnn Falletta Award for most promising female conductor.

Tall and slender, she delivered brief and incisive opening remarks, then conducted as gracefully as a dancer, giving a steady beat and clear cues without any showiness.

Most people go on vacation and bring back a T-shirt; George Gershwin returned from a 1932 trip to Cuba with a brilliant overture. The premiere of his colorful “Cuban Overture” with the New York Philharmonic at New York’s huge Lewisohn Stadium, in an all-Gershwin concert, was the composer’s happiest moment. Titled “Rumba” at the premiere, it was given a more formal name before being played at the Metropolitan Opera three months later. The piece demonstrates another giant step in Gershwin’s amazing progression into more sophisticated harmonic forms. Employing then-unfamiliar Cuban percussion instruments, he wove several themes around one another with imaginative skill. The unmistakable Gershwin sound teems with the joy of his gift, cut short by his untimely death at 38.

In keeping with Gershwin’s wishes, Ioannides brought four percussionists to the front of the stage, playing bongos, Cuban sticks, a gourd that is scraped and metal maracas. She knew how to make the piece swing, while bringing out some of the sometimes-hidden inner lines; the horns and brass were resplendent in the opening rumba rhythms. In the center section, a plaintive clarinet solo with undercurrent of string writing took over until the first theme returned full blast in a thrilling reprise. The transitions between those punchy rhythmic sections, which are often clumsy or a little abrupt, were smooth and organic.

Though it is sometimes played faster and louder, the reading had a rightness about it, with the orchestra playing as if they were just having fun.

In the center of the Gershwin came a tango section, a rhythm from Europe that became an Argentine musical signature. It is another of those traditions — like the Viennese waltz or Czech Slavonic dance — that require a nationalistic sensibility to bring off idiomatically.

Emigrants brought the bandoneón to Argentina around 1870, where it became a staple in smoky Buenos Aires tango bars until Astor Piazzolla brought it into recognition as an instrument capable of serious compositions. In its upper middle range, it almost sounds like a French musette or even an accordion, but it has much more depth, range and expressive capability than either.

Piazzolla composed his “Concerto for Bandoneón and Orchestra” in 1979 and, after his death just 20 years and three weeks ago, his publisher added the moniker “Aconcagua,” the name of the highest mountain in the Americas. In recordings Piazzolla made of the work — scored for strings, piano, harp, percussion and bandoneón — he used every effect his instrument was capable of, requiring a master of the instrument.

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Luckily, we had one — Jorge ‘Coco’ Trivisonno, who has played the piece with many orchestras and has toured with the popular group “Forever Tango.” Trivisonno can make that box sing, playing with deep soulfulness and obvious pride as a voice of his country.

The first movement bursts into life, with strings seeming to play against his instrument; the bandoneón poured out legato phrases, sometimes repetitive but somehow hypnotic. He made his two cadenzas sound improvised — which they probably partly were when Piazzolla recorded it. In the middle movement, Trivisonno plays a duet with himself in two registers, eventually joined in a trio by a supple violin solo by concertmaster Brian Reagin. An undulating piano line occasionally penetrated, along with harp, leading to a moody fade-out finale.

The finale was more emphatic, as he squeezed all the considerable passion out of his instrument, even more noticeable in sections with pizzicato strings until the flaming coda.

Trivisonno also played Piazzolla’s “Oblivion,” used in an 1982 Italian film called “Enrico IV.” Legend says it was written after a love affair went sour, and it is the epitome of sorrowfulness with the solo violin again making its melancholy statement. You could feel the tears on the page, with the instrument played more conversationally than in the concerto. It is the composer’s most popular piece, except for the one he wrote for the death of his father, “Adios Nonino.”

As an added present, Trivisonno graced us with a short, plaintive Piazzolla encore piece called “Chiquilin de Bachin,” infused with the sadness implicit in much of Piazzolla’s music. Trivisonno explained afterward that it is about a poor young street urchin who hangs around a bar (named Bachin) begging for pennies. The music couldn’t possibly have been about anything hopeful but, still, you didn’t want his playing to end.

Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem, “The Afternoon of a Faun,” marked the creation of the movement we know as impressionism; “To suggest, that is our aim,” the poet said. For Claude Debussy, that spirit of understatement seemed like the perfect counterbalance to the colossal extravagances of Bruckner and Strauss and the gigantic operas of Wagner. Mallarmé at first resented his poem being used as a vehicle, but wrote the composer after the 1894 premiere with gushing praise.

Richard Sherman’s gorgeous flute solo began Debussy’s “Prelude to ‘The Afternoon of a Faun,’” with excellent horn work as well. The first *tutti* passage was a little too forceful, taking away some of the contrast of the larger climax to come, as if the piece transitioned from watercolor to painting too soon. After that minor point, Ioannides’ flow brought the work to colorful life. You cannot attempt the work without superb wind players and without strings that are responsive and capable of great shading. Fortunately, she had them all.

The concert, played without intermission, ended with Paul Dukas’ colorful “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice.” Dukas is one of those composers recognized mostly by one

work, yet his “Piano Sonata,” ballet *La Peri*, and opera *Ariane et Barbe-Bleu* are all the unfairly neglected work of a master. Those who have seen Walt Disney’s “Fantasia” will have retained an indelible picture of Mickey Mouse as “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice.” (Though the Philadelphia Orchestra is credited in the movie, that section was made earlier in Hollywood and planned as a short until conductor Leopold Stokowski and Walt Disney saw the potential of adding new cartoons and making a longer film).

The hushed opening of the piece immediately signals an adventure, and eventually the bassoons – and contrabassoon – played their comic role with a jaunty unity. In the huge climaxes (as the brooms cause a flood), the horns and trumpets were spot-on. The final transition, winding that huge sound down to the hovering calm, was expertly judged before the ending’s sudden four notes (when the sorcerer kicks Mickey).

Ioannides’ program included two gems not played often enough and the Piazzolla pieces we might never hear in concert again. It’s impressive programming, and it’s obvious her future is very, very bright.

*Tom Di Nardo has written about the arts since 1982 for the Philadelphia Daily News.*

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