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In “See Change I,” Tacoma Symphony’s first conductor finalist Sarah Ioannides takes the orchestra to new heights of skill and nuance

Post by [Rosemary Ponnekanti](#) / The News Tribune on Feb. 25, 2013 at 10:07 am | [View comments](#)

If its first finalist is anything to go by, the [Tacoma Symphony](#) won’t have a problem choosing a new artistic director that’ll take them to higher musical places. A nearly-full crowd showed up at the Pantages yesterday to watch Sarah Ioannides, the first of four finalists in the orchestra’s search for a new artistic director, blaze her way through an audition concert (“See Change I”) that combined sterling precision with deep, nuanced expression – and an excellent solo performance by the orchestra’s double bass principal Chris Burns.

Conducting mostly from memory – including Shostakovich’s epic Fifth Symphony – the British native showed obvious rapport with the orchestra, who were following as one her encouraging but uncompromising direction. But while her precision and thought-out structure was impressive – not for a while have the violins sounded so tight – the first half was a little lacking in drama. Glinka’s “Russlan and Ludmilla” overture opened the show, and this Cossack dance with its bouncy theme and gleeful fast runs needed more wild abandon than Ioannides was going to indulge, going instead for lightness and spot-on unity. Facing the violins almost the entire time she also missed a few lower-string moments that could have made this a less refined, Mozartean experience.

Next in the spotlight, though, was an instrument that rarely gets the chance to shine but deserves it all the more: the double bass. TSO principal Chris Burns sailed through the Divertimento Concertante by Nino Rota – a mid-20th-century composer best known for his scores for Fellini, Coppola and Zeffirelli – with a calm virtuosity and thoughtful expression. Subtly miked (which was a very good thing, as the Pantages is probably the worst acoustic nightmare for a soft instrument like this), Burns’ playing was effortlessly clear and lyrical through Rota’s show-offy spiccatos, double-stops, arpeggios and harmonics. And while there wasn’t as much melodrama as Rota’s score called for – think comically lumbering cellos in the Prokofiev-esque march, cheeky piping woodwinds in the fast finale and dramatic strings in the opening – [Ioannides kept the orchestra in a supportive balance.](#)

But Ioannides’ clear passion was the Shostakovich. Written in a desperate, undercover defiance of the Stalinist regime, this symphony is a war-horse, but under Ioannides’ elegant direction the TSO played it as if discovering it for the first time. The painfully heartbroken opening – which can often sound worryingly hesitant – was passionate and confident, the ironic second-movement ¾ had strong bass/cello presence and delicate “puppet” solos from violin and flute. More attention to the cellos in the tragic lament of the third movement would have helped them be as strong as the violins, but the sound was poignant despite the dry Pantages acoustic, and the fourth movement roared along in a terrifying blast of tight brass, scary percussion and screaming violins.

Throughout all, [Ioannides coaxed and commanded multifaceted nuance with almost balletic grace.](#) She’s not a good talker – a little academic, and understandably nervous – but [she had the Tacoma Symphony playing to the hilt, and the standing audience along with her.](#)

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Arts reporter and critic Rosemary Ponnekanti keeps you in touch with the arts and culture scene with the help of other News Tribune writers, critics and editors.

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The TSO plays next in pops concert “I Love a Piano” on March 24; the second conductor finalist Paul Haas will perform May 4. 253-272-7264, tacomasymphony.org

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