

Symphony begins season on high note

As dusk leaned toward the dark of night, the marquee area of the Plaza Theatre sparkled with bright lights, bright smiles and an even brighter sense of anticipation.

It was the debut of the El Paso Symphony Orchestra at the revitalized Plaza Theatre. Well, not exactly the debut. The symphony's final performance of the past season was played there, but it was kind of a rocky outing that had people questioning the Plaza as a suitable venue.

The sound was not acceptable. Anyone familiar with the excellence of the symphony knew it was not that group's fault, and many people were soon calling for a return to the Chavez Theatre.

One immediate improvement made by the symphony for this season was starting at 7:30 instead of 8 p.m. For some reason, that half-hour difference is quite pleasant, especially getting out a bit earlier.

But the sound was still on most everyone's mind as they settled into the chairs and once again admired the mag-

Charlie Edgren



nificence of the Plaza's resurrection.

To a solid round of applause, Maestra Sarah Ioannides strode onto stage and, well before approaching the podium, lifted her baton and pointed at the musicians. A drum roll started, surprising those of us who didn't know what was coming.

As the first stirring notes of "The Star-Spangled Banner" rolled from the stage, audience members didn't stand up — they leaped to their feet in honor and appreciation.

After that, Ioannides probably could have had the symphony play variations on "Chopsticks" for two hours and no one would have noticed.

There sure wasn't anything wrong with the sound during the playing of the national an-

them. But for me, the true test came a bit later.

First, however ... From an audience member's point of view, it's a pure pleasure to have Ioannides directing the symphony. Her energy level is incredible, and her obvious happiness with what she's doing is infectious.

It's great to watch her at work, because it doesn't seem like work to her, rather indulging a passion that she wants to share with the audience.

We're fortunate to have her here.

The sound was good. Whatever tweaking and tuning has been going on since last season has worked. This is an excellent symphony, one we're extraordinarily lucky to have in El Paso.

They work hard, they are exceedingly talented, and deserve to have their product delivered to the audience without obstructions.

A real test was the masterful cello playing by Zuill Bailey, already an El Paso icon as artistic director at El Paso Pro-Musica.

As a lay person and non-musician, I can only describe it this way: A couple of times the hand on the strings was so close to the bow it seemed they almost touched, and the high note that he coaxed from his cello was unbelievably clear, even as it grew softer and softer. No doubt that is one more testament to his talent, but it also says something about the Plaza's sound. It's working, the way artists like Bailey and the symphony deserve.

The bright lights of the marquee area seemed dim by comparison to the brighter smiles of patrons leaving a highly successful debut.

Looks like it's going to be a great season.

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