

## Maestra sets the bar high for Philharmonic

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Sarah Ioannides set the bar very high once again Saturday for the Spartanburg Philharmonic Orchestra.

Works with an international flavor by Dane Carl Nielsen, Argentine Astor Piazzolla and Hungarian Bela Bartok gave rise to the program's subtitle "Exotic ... Argentina to Arabia." But there was another unifying aspect to the concert. Only recently, and after their deaths, have these composers achieved their widespread fame and acceptance in traditional orchestral concerts. Maestra Ioannides should be praised for her intelligent and interesting programming.

"Nielsen's Aladdin Suite, Op. 34" is still not well known but is a thoroughly delightful work. The orchestra opened the concert with three of the five numbers listed in the program. I especially enjoyed the "Oriental Festival March" with its sonorous chords and undulating dynamics, and beautifully blended sounds from the winds and strings. The piece had quaint clichés — "orientalisms" — including altered minor scales, but its sound was still clearly drawn from Nielsen's quirky harmonic palette. The final African dance displayed interesting irregular phrases with resonant low brass and well-played xylophone passages.

I must confess that I have been guilty of enjoying and spreading accordion jokes.

James Crabb's masterful performance on classical accordion went a long way toward changing my mind about the expressive possibilities of the instrument. It usually has a rather flat, nasal, reedy sound that is associated with polkas and dated Italian and French popular music. He began his performance with a humorous informal instrument history and demonstration that charmed the audience, making them more receptive to the unfamiliar work.

Piazzolla's "Aconcagua, Concerto for Bandoneon" is a rich and interesting piece exquisitely scored for the soloist accompanied by piano, harp, timpani, percussion and string orchestra. The three movements were full of tango and other syncopated rhythms, Stravinsky-inspired ostinatos, colorful harmonies and textures. The second movement was my favorite, with a stunning passage for the accordion, harp, solo violin and cello. The last movement featured an amazing section for the piano (well played by Karen Sanders) with the soloist, pizzicato strings and guiro (an Afro-Cuban notched gourd that is scraped).

Crabb's playing was masterful and very sensitive. He seemed to relish interacting musically with the orchestra. Ioannides accompanied him with a sure hand and a balanced ensemble that never obscured the solo. The audience enjoyed his two Piazzolla encores.

Bartok's "Concerto for Orchestra" was hailed by musicians as a masterpiece when it first appeared in 1944. Even then, near the end of his life, the composer was not popular or widely accepted. There are reasons for this. For one, his music is



generally dissonant and difficult to perform, though “Concerto” is often quite conservative harmonically. For decades, only virtuosic orchestras performed it, and only recently have orchestras in South Carolina attempted it.

Therein lies the problem with Saturday’s performance. Our local musicians are fine indeed, but the wide instrumental ranges, meter changes, complex, hard-to-hear harmonies and rapid-fire, awkward, nontraditional scale passages often taxed them — especially the strings. To her credit, Ioannides chose slower tempos and worked hard to guide them through the tough spots. This did take away from the forward momentum and thrust of the more exciting passages, for example, the brass fugue in the first movement and much of the finale.

The woodwinds, along with the horns, delivered the best performance overall. It was gratifying that she singled them out first for special recognition. The second movement worked very well, and Alison Turner’s piccolo solos in the third movement were also noteworthy.

I don’t want to give the impression that the orchestra should not play this repertoire. They must, and we need to hear it. I believe Spartanburg can support the effort even though we have fewer resources than Charleston, Columbia, Greenville or Asheville, N.C. When the program is this challenging, the orchestra needs our support and the funds to give them extra rehearsals to make the series an unqualified success.

Dr. David Berry is an associate professor of music history and theory at Converse College. He also is a composer whose other specialties include computers in music and musical aesthetics. He has experience and national recognition in commercial music as well as fine-art music. He received his Bachelor’s of Music in horn performance from the University of Maryland and his Master of Music in composition from Converse College; he has earned a doctor of musical arts in composition from the University of South Carolina.

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