

Lima Symphony performs fitting tribute to its former leader

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By LUCIA UNRAU

The Lima Symphony Orchestra's second concert of the season Saturday evening was a celebration of French music, including a tribute to Joseph Firszt, former music director/conductor of the orchestra.

Firszt, who died in August, began his 29-year tenure with the orchestra in 1967 and was responsible for growing the ensemble from 50 volunteer musicians to 75 paid musicians. He also began the orchestra's outreach with school programs, master classes and joint sponsorship of the Lima Area Youth Orchestra.

Michael Houff, concertmaster, was the soloist for the official Firszt tribute, playing the Massenet Meditation from "Thaïs." According to LSO board member Barbara Young, this was Firszt's favorite piece.

Frédéric Massenet was the most respected composer in late 19th century France. He was known best for his operas, particularly "Thaïs."

This meditation is an interlude near the end of the opera and provides an opportunity for the leader of the orchestra to portray his skill.

Houff, accompanied by Jan Bishop on harp, along with the full orchestra, provided a beautiful performance of the work. The audience was entranced by the soaring melodies and the sensitive and musical accompaniment of the orchestra. Houff played with a warmth and tenderness that demonstrated the beauty of this particular piece. It was a fitting tribute to Firszt's memory.

The first two works of the "official" program set the audience up for what was to come in the evening — a very musical program played exceptionally well by our local orchestra. It was evident that every section of the orchestra had great intonation and was playing well as an ensemble.

The Verdi "Overture to I Vespri Siciliani" and Emile Waldteufel's "Nuee d'Oiseaux Polka" were excit-

ing even though the first woodwind ensemble in the polka sounded a bit tentative. Both of these pieces were exciting and enjoyable, with the polka's dance rhythms beautifully performed.

Ravel's "Daphnis and Chloe" was originally written as a ballet score for a very large orchestra in the early 1900s. The LSO performed Suite No. 2, which Ravel created by extracting the last three works from the ballet. The performance of this work exhibited the LSO's ability to create an exquisite balance of voices.

Some may wonder why the saxophone would be considered for a concert featuring French orchestral music when most associate it with jazz genres. The saxophone was invented by Adolphe Sax in 1841, while he was living in Paris. He intended it to be an orchestral instrument and several French composers, including Henri Tomasi, wrote orchestral pieces featuring the saxophone.

Actually, the saxophone blends extraordinarily well with the orchestra and Jeffrey Loeffert demonstrated that Saturday night. Loeffert, 2007 winner of the Lima Symphony Friends of the Orchestra concerto competition, has studied in Paris.

He demonstrated a mastery of the instrument, clean and articulate passage work, warm and clear tone, and a musicality that is unmatched by more well-known saxophonists. It's evident why he has won the accolades that he has; expect to hear his name in the future as he is a young and upcoming musical artist. The orchestra provided a sensitive accompaniment and the audience was appreciative.

To finish the evening, the audience was treated to the classic "Les Preludes" by Franz Liszt. The brass section was exceptional, the woodwinds outstanding, and the strings brilliant.

One section that deserves praise is

the percussion section. The percussionists had no solos on Saturday night, but they made this performance effective. They listen to the balance and are there to enhance rather than overpower the orchestra.

It was disappointing to see the sparse audience in attendance. Perhaps it's because of the unstable economy and people are trying to cut back, perhaps it's because this program may not have been as familiar as some. Regardless of the reason, music is what makes us human, it carries us beyond the realities of the day-to-day challenges. Experiencing the level of artistry on Saturday was worth the effort.

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