

## Soloist and Symphony Triumph in Riveting Concert

Written by Zach Carstensen

Tuesday, 05 December 2000 18:00

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Anton Dvorák and Bedrich Smetana are Czechoslovakia's most famous composers. Full of folk tendencies and a love of their homeland, they expressed the tapestry of bohemian life in their music. While Smetana helped develop Czech nationalism, Dvorák made it popular.

Though Dvorák wrote a total of nine symphonies, only the last three – culminating with the well-known ninth (From the New World) – receive much time on concert stages. On Saturday, December 2, the Quad City Symphony (QCSO) performed Dvorák's most nationalistic symphony, the eighth, and filled out the program with a Vivaldi concerto and a brand-new work by Christopher Rouse. The concert was riveting, unique, and musically uplifting. It was an appropriate break for the holidays and seemed to foreshadow a good second half of the season.

For the first half of the concert, world-famous guitarist Sharon Isbin accompanied the QCSO, and as the most famous soloist to grace the Adler stage in the past five years, she didn't disappoint. Isbin has been nominated for a Grammy Award and has recorded a broad range of material, from baroque to crossover efforts. A proponent of new music for the guitar, she co-commissioned the new Rouse piece the Quad City Symphony performed, Concert de Gaudi. (Isbin also performs new works by Foss, Corigliano, and Schwantener on her latest CD.)

Isbin's performance of the one-movement Concert de Gaudi seared itself into Quad Cities music history. Written in homage to architect Antoni Gaudi, the concerto tries to capture the surrealism and mysticism of Gaudi's Barcelona architecture. The pieces began with flamenco rhythms and glided into the deeply moving middle section, which demonstrated Rouse's shift from the rock-inspired jarring music of his early years to the more atmospheric trademarks of his current compositions. The concerto and Isbin pulsed their way to conclusion.

Prior to Rouse's stimulating concerto, Isbin and most of the primary players of the orchestra danced through Vivaldi's Concerto in D Major for Guitar and Strings. Vivaldi's ability to write music that is both cheerful and reflective was on display with this concerto, and the heartfelt playing of Isbin and the orchestra served as a perfect introduction to the beautiful capabilities of the classical guitar.

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Saturday's concert culminated in the performance of Dvorák's Symphony No. 8, a crowning achievement of the nationalistic repertoire that is sometimes subtitled the composer's "English" symphony. The optimistic beginning sets the stage for the uncertainty that consumes the music by the end of the piece.

The Quad City Symphony Orchestra played the second movement, described as pensive, with heart. Filled with folk imagery, the *allegretto grazioso* danced forward under the baton of Donald Schleicher.

Dvorák ended the symphony with a movement in direct contrast with the cheerful *allegro con brio*. Though not particularly dark, the final movement reflects what appears to be Dvorák's uncertainty about his homeland and the future of bohemian nationalism. Churning forward in full force, the symphony doesn't end triumphantly, but rather leaves listeners, after its abrupt finish, wondering, What's next?

This concert offered a performance that got better as Schleicher, Isbin, and the players challenged each other to do more in the playing. The music chosen was the right mix of baroque layers, neo-classical gems, and the romantic symphony. Towering above it all was a soloist of unparalleled quality.

At times, I became part of the concert; it infected my spirit and uplifted my soul. More than any other Quad City Symphony show this season, the music was performed honestly and with a purpose. If the QCSO can keep this intensity level and performance quality through the end of the season, concertgoers have much to look forward to.