

IU Philharmonic's Tchaikovsky makes up for disappointing violin concerto

By Clemens Matuschek

It should have been a triumphant inauguration concert of new IU School of Music faculty member Jaime Laredo. An enthusiastic audience filled the Musical Arts Center to the last seat in the season's opening concert, conductor David Effron was at his best and the Philharmonic Orchestra even more so.

The Overture to "Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor" by Otto Nicolai – you might call him 'Weber light' –, despite some pitch issues in the first violins, was the perfect opener: straightforward, charmingly corny, effectively showcasing the orchestra's capabilities – including the obligatory conductor-hop before the final note.

Ferruccio Busoni's Violin Concerto D Major is not of that kind – at least not when played in the way Mr. Laredo did. It has to be said: the former prodigy child fell short of the admittedly immense expectations of the audience. If he had wanted to evade these by not picking one of the violin concert hits, his strategy failed, both due to the piece (which does not flow into one's ears so easily) and his performance.

Although Mr. Laredo undoubtedly has the technical skills of a soloist of his fame, the sound of his violin did not convey these. Throughout large parts of the first movement, a harsh, rough sound emerged from his strings, as if he wanted to compensate for a lack of rosin by an extreme use of brute force. That stressed the modern aspects of the work of the visionary yet idiosyncratic Italian composer, the concerto's fascinating way of developing material. But it kept the piece from sounding smooth and at least this listener from enjoying the piece. The second movement, due to long soft passages, sounded a lot more pleasant, especially the heavenly final phrases. In the last movement, conductor Effron had to even out the

tempo differences between soloist and orchestra several times. But while this was the orchestra's only big flaw, Mr. Laredo returned to his forced bowing technique. Still, one should be looking forward to his performances during the semester.

The performance of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony thrilled and enthused the audience. The dark episodes of the first movement couldn't have sounded darker; the second movement's love theme almost made one cry. The gay waltz led to the fourth movement's tableau of a titanic battle, concluding with a heroic hymn.

One factor guaranteeing the incredible strength of the performance was the impressive, smooth overall sound of the orchestra: mellow strings, precise woodwinds, overwhelming brass. But also a lot of individual players demonstrated their abilities: clarinetist Kristin King beautifully presented the first theme in a long and elaborate solo; horn (despite some forgivable slip-ups) and cellos celebrated the sweet theme of the second movement.

Although Mr. Effron's way of conducting appears Napoleonesque, if not comical sometimes, and most of his tempos are on the slow end of the continuum, if not beyond, he created an inspiring performance, awakening the Russian parts in one's soul.

Preceding the concert, Distinguished Professor Menahem Pressler received the honorary title "Commandeur in the Order of Arts and Letters" by the Consul General of France – and lots of hugs and standing ovations along with it. In his speech he said: "You see, it's worthwhile practicing" – a morale that the Philharmonic Orchestra had obviously taken to heart previously.