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Maestro's 'audition' impressive

By T.L. Ponick

When it comes to the area's classical music scene, most media coverage is, understandably, directed toward local behemoths such as the National Symphony Orchestra and the Washington National Opera. After all, these major ensembles attract substantial audiences with extensive performance schedules punctuated by the appearance of top international soloists and conductors.

Operating just under the radar is an array of smaller musical organizations that collectively add heft to the capital's cultural life. One of these, the venerable Friday Morning Music Club, began in 1886 as a kind of rotating salon in which classical music recitals were given in members' private residences. Today, the group's varied season is supported by dues and gifts and takes place in a variety of public venues.

In addition to offering an extensive chamber-music schedule, the club gathers an orchestra several times a year to perform repertoire requiring larger ensembles. Concerts are free, and the first of the season took place Sunday in the surprisingly robust auditorium at Bishop Ireton High School in Alexandria.

Regarded as a "semipro" orchestra that includes a mix of professionals and talented amateurs, the club is auditioning five guest conductors this year for possible appointment to its top music post. First up was Stephen Czarkowski, assistant conductor of Catholic University's orchestra.

Mr. Czarkowski led the ensemble in a surprisingly challenging concert of romantic classics, including Beethoven's Overture to "Fidelio" and Third Piano Concerto in C minor, and Finnish composer Jean Sibelius' towering Symphony No. 2 in D major (Op. 43).

After a spirited performance of the overture, marred slightly by two botched entrances by the horns, the ensemble weighed in with a notable reading of Beethoven's vigorous Concert No. 3, headlined by a rare appearance by venerable pianist Seymour Lipkin.

One of the last of a dwindling number of pianists playing in the 20th-century romantic tradition, Mr. Lipkin studied with Serge Koussevitzky and George Szell and has performed extensively with numerous international ensembles in addition to serving as assistant conductor for the New York Philharmonic.

Mr. Lipkin's performance of the concerto was crisp and clean, with steadiness and assurance appropriate to a work that marks the composer's decisive transition from the classical to the romantic era. The orchestra, under Mr. Czarkowski's steady hand, performed energetically and with a precision that was particularly notable during several treacherous entrances.

The Sibelius, which followed the intermission, was quite a surprise. A substantial work with contemplative moments punctuated by massive brass choirs, the symphony runs the emotional gamut from exuberant heights to the depths of despair. It develops in a seemingly haphazard way, introducing a series of disjointed motifs in the first movement that eventually are transformed and resolved. The resulting frequent tempo shifts can be a real obstacle to a coherent interpretation of the work.

Yet Mr. Czarkowski and the orchestra were more than up to the task, serving up a truly impressive performance for the disappointingly small audience. On occasion, one wished for the ballast of a few more lower string players. On the whole, though, the quality of the performance was superb and should keep Mr. Czarkowski in the running for the ensemble's top post.

For more information on the Friday Morning Music Club's current season, go to www.fmmc.org.