

CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEW



Rose Baca/Staff Photographer

Richard McKay leads the Dallas Chamber Symphony in Alberto Ginastera's *Variaciones Concertantes*.

Orchestra responds to inspired leader

Dallas Chamber Symphony gives engaging concert

By **SCOTT CANTRELL**
Special Contributor

Opened in 2012, the 750-seat acoustically adjustable Dallas City Performance Hall virtually begged for the chamber orchestra series the city had lacked. Into that void immediately stepped the Dallas Chamber Symphony, newly organized by artistic director Richard McKay.

With a conducting doctorate from the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, McKay assembled mostly young musicians and led with a clear beat. But a stiff

podium manner gave musicians little expressive direction; performances were like black-and-white dot-matrix renderings of great paintings.

Five years on, a very different McKay led the group's season-closing concert Tuesday night. If anything, the full-body expressivity might have been a little too much at moments. But, in quite a challenging program, it inspired the largest number of musicians I've seen under the DCS banner to fully engaged, shapely performances.

The biggest surprise may have been hearing the Brahms First Symphony

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performed by only 40 musicians. But Brahms himself led a mere 49 players at the premiere, and the lively acoustics of the City Performance Hall certainly needed no more.

If one missed full-orchestra plushness, the smaller ensemble clarified Brahms' dense textures. With far fewer strings than usual, the usual numbers of winds and brasses were set in higher relief; in fact, they could have been more reticent.

McKay sensibly took the first-movement introduction at the same tempo as the main Allegro, although with the smaller ensemble his pace felt too deliberate. Otherwise tempos were fine and the music was sensitively molded. There were notable solos from Sharon Lacey (oboe), Jonathan Jones (clarinet), David Lesser (horn) and Kazuhiro Takagi (violin).

Opening the concert, Alberto Ginastera's 1953 *Variaciones concertantes* showcased different players in contrasting variations, variously transmuting folk-music idioms from the composer's native Argentina. The performance didn't always have the sleek sheen of a full-time professional orchestra, but it was certainly accomplished.

Standouts were Jones' sassy scherzo, Lacey and Leslie Massenburg in an oboe-and-bassoon duet, Takagi's virtuoso display and Lesser's lyrical pastorale. (Less welcome were repeated vocal contributions from a couple of too-young children.) The full-orchestra finale, a jolly dance flashing brilliant colors, turning into an Argentine *Rite of Spring*, was dispatched with pizzazz.

Pianist Kenneth Broberg, winner of the 2016 Dallas Chamber Symphony International Piano Competition, delivered the up-and-down chatters, thunders and sweeps of Liszt's virtuosic Totentanz with brilliance and authority, but he also brought poetry to more introspective passages. (Too bad the hall's Yamaha piano sounds so steely under pressure.) He'll be one of the contestants at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, coming to Fort Worth in May.

Scott Cantrell is the former classical music critic of *The Dallas Morning News*.

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