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Chamber Night at Perelman

By David Patrick Stearns
For The Inquirer

Just because the end is in sight for Ignat Solzhenitsyn's music directorship of the Chamber Orchestra of [Philadelphia](#) doesn't mean his relationship with the players ceases to grow. Monday's ambitious program featuring Mozart's richly scored *Symphony No. 31 ("Paris")* and Mendelssohn's normally big-orchestra *Symphony No. 4 ("Italian")* is one of the better concerts I've heard from this collaboration over the last 10 years, centering on a single element: sonority.

That's never been a Chamber Orchestra strong suit, but the Mozart symphony positively glistened. The bigger challenge was Mendelssohn played by an ensemble less than half what audiences are used to. But the orchestra projected an alternative sound world, perfectly convincing on its own terms, with a greater wind instrument presence and without the voluptuousness that comes with a larger string contingent.

The sound was leaner but felt more forceful in the Perelman Theater acoustic. A strong sense of the music's structure meant that lapses only added to the overall personality. The first movement's thematic recapitulation didn't seem repetitive (as it so often does) because Solzhenitsyn summoned extra weight from the orchestra. The final movement's high-velocity romp more readily revealed rigor in this less-plush sound, including all sorts of fugal activity that you always knew was there but that took on a piquance suggesting that this is where the symphony is at its best.

In contrast to the fail-safe Mendelssohn, Anton Rubinstein's once-popular, now-forgotten *Piano Concerto No. 4* showed why it's so seldom heard since the retirement of the great Josef Hofmann, the former Curtis Institute director who studied with Rubinstein in 19th-century Russia and

championed the piece.

Each movement sounds like a different composer: Initially, the concerto gruffly announces its own importance, but is so melodically unengaging that it's both dire and inconsequential. The middle movement gives a good reason to hear the piece - its lovely melody is endlessly buoyant - and the final movement is unfiltered Mendelssohn in manner and content.

Russian pianist Mikhail Yanovitsky had such a gleamingly well-defined sonority that you were happy to hear him play anything, especially when his exterior coolness lit a blaze under the music, urged on by Solzhenitsyn's ability to find escalating drama in repeating sequences in the orchestral writing. The theater felt claustrophobic with so much sound bouncing around, but if any music can make a great impression without being memorable, it's this. Enterprising programming, but not worth a rerun.