

FROM THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Brahms launches Chicago Philharmonic

By Michael Cameron

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Datsun to Nissan, Esso to Exxon, Andersen to Accenture. Corporations regularly change names, for reasons obvious or obscure. Symphony II, whose personnel hail from the Lyric Opera Orchestra, opened its season Sunday at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall under the new moniker Chicago Philharmonic, a welcome attempt to avoid instant comparisons.

Local concertgoers have long known that such comparisons are beside the point -- Lyric's top-rank musicians need not take a back seat to any in town.

The Philharmonic began its 15th season with a program drawn from the most familiar names, but with one unfamiliar work. Brahms' Serenade No. 2 may be from his top drawer, but it remains something of a novelty. It is odd for being a work composed for chamber orchestra from the Romantic era and it excludes violins.

As the name suggests, it employs classical forms and unfolds at a leisurely pace. Conductor Larry Rachleff was wise not to force the common conception of a stern, tightly controlled Brahms into this loose-limbed, charming work.

So shapely was this reading that in nearly every measure the ear sensed an impending peak or a gentle retreat.

Brahms' familiar emphasis on pairs of winds (and pairs of pairs) was always front and center. The first oboe is so prominent that at times it takes on the taste of a concerto, a challenge the unflagging Robert Morgan faced with phrase after phrase of shapely melody.

Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto clearly has not suffered the same fate as Brahms' Serenade. The young violinist Jennifer Frautschi is molding a career with smart interpretations of both warhorses and rarities. Frautschi sports a vibrant, steely tone, dressed with an intense vibrato that sometimes narrows to a tense quiver.

While the Canzonetta unfolded with a series of deeply felt utterances, it was in the finale that Frautschi caught fire. Her off-string bowings crackled with a percussive snap that never sacrificed clarity of pitch.

The concert opened with a peppy account of Rossini's Overture to "The Barber of Seville."