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Contemporary Youth Orchestra: "Thresholds" at the Maltz (Nov. 21)

by Kevin McLaughlin



In his booklet notes for the Contemporary Youth Orchestra's season opener, music director Kristopher S. Morron spoke of listening, trust, curiosity, and patience — qualities that bind together not only orchestras but communities.

Thirty-two seasons on, CYO continues to live out those ideals, inviting young musicians to wander into the unknown territory of contemporary music and discover, through collaboration, how much they can grow.

Thresholds, the orchestra's November 21 concert at the Maltz Performing Arts Center, was an evening of stories told in sound — four works by living American composers that asked the young musicians to stretch, both as individuals and as an ensemble. Morron guided them with a steady hand and a clear sense of purpose.

Katahj Copley's *Gasoline Rainbows* began the evening with a nod to Detroit — a city of factories, Motown grooves, and the shimmering colors that dance on rain-soaked pavement. Even if the Detroit of memory did not leap out at once, Copley's score painted its own landscape, full of shifting hues and textures. Flutist Arisa Boonpongmanee and bongo player Theo Grimes added their own brushstrokes to the canvas.

Eric Whitacre's *October* changed the mood, offering gentle, pastoral melodies and warm harmonies that drifted in from the English countryside, with echoes of Vaughan

Williams. The music asked for a kind of tenderness and balance that these young players are still learning to find. Yet the solos, by oboist Yuki Wang, clarinetist Lainey Miller, and cellist Brian Du, caught the wistfulness of autumn.

At the heart of the evening stood James M. Stephenson's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, a musical retelling of Washington Irving's tale of Ichabod Crane and the Headless Horseman. Stephenson's orchestration, alive with color and invention, gave the orchestra some of its most vivid moments. Boonpongmanee's flute, deep and haunting, lingered in the memory.

Much of Mike Carney's spirited narration, meant to guide listeners through the story, was lost beneath the orchestra, leaving a gap where words and music might have met and diminishing the impact of Stephenson's inventive score.

Brian Balmages' *Dream Machine* closed the program with a swirling, cinematic journey that drifted between sleep and waking. Its bright percussion and piano, sparkling here and there, sometimes called to mind the world of John Williams. Solos by Boonpongmanee, hornist Michelle Saab, bassoonist Will Bach, and violinist David Wang stood out like bright threads in the tapestry.

Intonation and ensemble sometimes wandered, and passages that called for precision did not always find it. Still, individual players showed promise, and the orchestra's willingness to step into unfamiliar territory was heartening.

CYO's work extends beyond any single performance. As board president Heather Vercillo, once a clarinetist in the orchestra, observed from the stage, its young musicians arrive from different schools and backgrounds, learning to listen and to build something together. The music may not yet shine with perfect polish, but the lessons of playing — and playing together — will last long after the final note.

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