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Mark Elder directs the CSO with flair

By John von Rhein

“Richard Goode was the patrician soloist, reminding us why he’s widely admired as one of the foremost Mozart pianists America has produced. Typically, there was enormous musical intelligence at work in his playing, along with a grace and refinement, and purling tone, that connected long phrases with the utmost fluency and musical understanding. Everything was clearly thought out yet nothing felt less than spontaneous.”

There are several reasons why Mark Elder has placed so high on the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s MVP list during the more than three decades he has been appearing here intermittently as a podium guest. One reason seems primary: The British conductor has a special flair for engaging the orchestra players, along with the audience, in programs that depart just enough from the prescribed [playbook](#) to make them feel fresh.

Take the assortment of pieces he is directing for his return to the subscription series this [weekend](#) at Symphony Center. Now, the inclusion of a popular Mozart piano concerto and a standard-issue Richard Strauss tone poem is not in itself a departure from the norm. But Elder elected to bring back into the CSO’s downtown repertory Charles Ives’ Symphony No. 2, the first great symphony by an American composer, unheard at these concerts for more than 30 years. And that made all the difference.

At Thursday night’s concert, the loving care Elder and the orchestra invested in the Ives symphony seemed to have an invigorating effect on the more familiar works on either side of it.

The conductor’s brief spoken remarks must have reassured [audience](#) members new to the Ives Second who were expecting to be bombarded by typically Ivesian [dissonances](#). (The only sour note comes at the very end, and it’s a dilly.)

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Actually, Symphony No. 2, written between 1901 and 1910, represents Ives at his most romantic and warmly nostalgic, as he looks back on the [music](#) he grew up with as an impressionable son of a bandmaster in Danbury, Conn. Patriotic anthems, hymn tunes, barn dances, Stephen Foster songs and other bits of Americana are interwoven with quotations from the German classics of Brahms, Dvorak and others from the formal side of his musical education.

You might call this gallimaufry of eclectic ideas Ives' declaration of independence from the musical tenets of contemporary [Europe](#). The symphony is something he needed to get out of his system before moving on to more radical projects. What makes it feel like a masterpiece, rather than a patchwork, is the skill with which Ives combines all this disparate material into a coherent musical structure. Who but Ives could make "Camptown Races" and the Brahms First Symphony feel as if they belong in the same sentence?

At times in Thursday's performance I wanted more all-American swagger and gusto. Elder was no slouch, however, when it came to pointing rhythms, shaping long melodic periods and clarifying the busy textures. And he saw to it that when the many quotes popped out at the listener they did so without breaking the musical flow. The orchestra responded wholeheartedly to his urgings.

An intermission was needed to separate the great, dissonant yawp that ends the Ives symphony from the sunny, soothing strains of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23 in A major (K.488), which began the second half.

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In short, you got the sense of an interpreter who sees the composer whole, who can balance the high spirits and introspection that make the A major so treasurable among the great Mozart piano concertos.

For his sensitive accompaniment, Elder brought the woodwind choir literally front and almost [center](#) – all the better to bring out the quasi-operatic dialog that makes the central adagio feel like a duet from Mozart's contemporaneous "Marriage of Figaro." Principal clarinet Stephen Williamson, interrupting his yearlong leave from the CSO, contributed sublime solo playing alongside his equally fine colleagues Mathieu Dufour, flute, and David McGill, bassoon.

The title character of Strauss' "Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks," which ended the program, was not the usual noisy miscreant, but a likable rogue with a sense of humor and even a touch of couth about him. Elder took pains to allow as much daylight as he could into the rich orchestral textures. You don't often hear in the big Strauss tone poems the kind of heightened detail you

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heard here, nor the high level of teamwork that marked the woodwind and brass playing, in particular. Dan Gingrich and his colleagues of the horn section deserved their special bow. You could hardly blame the enthusiastic audience member who yelled “Beautiful!” before the last chord had time to die away.

The program will be repeated at 8 p.m. Saturday; \$32-\$246. Ives’ Second Symphony also will be the centerpiece of a “Beyond the Score” presentation at 7:30 p.m. Friday and 3 p.m. Sunday; \$24-\$151. Symphony Center 220 S. Michigan Ave.; 312-294-3000, cso.org.

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