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IVCI Laureate Bella Hristova Returns with Style - Sept. 16, 2008

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Review by Juliette Javaheri, Sept 18, 2008

On Tuesday night September 16th, Bella Hristova came back to Indianapolis to perform an evening of chamber music with the Ronen Chamber Ensemble, opening the 2008-2009 International Violin Competition of Indianapolis Laureate Series. The last time she was here was when she performed Bartok's 2nd Violin Concerto as a finalist in the 2006 International Violin Competition of Indianapolis (which you can still watch and listen to online:

http://www.violin.org/2006comp/listen_watch.html. I am sometimes skeptical when I go to a concert like this. Not all violinists who can get up and perform a concerto with orchestra are suited for the sensitivity required of the give-and-take relationships that exist in the best chamber music partnerships: leading without force, following without submission, creating one voice out of many (hopefully) distinct sounds and differing ideas.

My skepticism was quickly put to ease with the opening Divertimento in G major by Haydn (for flute, violin and cello). The three women on stage were equal partners in that give and take relationship as they made their way through this fun but brief piece. Bella matched the flute's smooth tone (played by Leela Breithaupt) with her own seamless lines alternating with crisp articulation and projection in the lighter sections.

Bella's dark lyrical tone on the lower strings is especially beautiful, as showcased by Ives's Largo for Violin, Clarinet and Piano. This spacious, dreamy work began with a melancholic jazzy intro by pianist Chih-Yi Chen, followed by Bella's entrance. Her tone on the G-string was rich and warm—clearly, this girl has soul. Then, in the blink of an eye she flew to the upper register of the E-string with impeccable precision and grace. This piece requires a sort of inner calm as well as a virtuoso technique to pull off the long singing lines and melodies that were passed between her and clarinetist David Bellman.

The Stravinsky (Divertimento for Violin and Piano after The Fairy's Kiss ballet) was a lot of fun. The piece quickly turns from one sound world to another like a good story, with various characters and moods. I felt that Bella could have played up the contrasts between sections a bit more; however she left us all with a smile on our face by the end, in awe at her

virtuosic technique and charm. In fact, the harder things get, the more comfortable she seems to be. I found I often had to remind myself of the difficulty of the repertoire she was performing—as it seemed perfectly in control in Bella's hands. You can tell quite a lot about someone's character from the way they play. Besides being passionate and hardworking (demonstrated by the level of her ability), I felt like she was pretty comfortable in her own skin, as there was never a moment where it seemed she was trying hard to be something or someone other than her own self. It was nice to see such a genuine performer.

For the main course on the evening's program the group performed the uber-romantic string quintet in G major by Dvorak. This was the most satisfying of all the works on the program. The communication between all members of the quintet was fantastic (not to mention beautiful playing by 2nd violinist Louise Alexander and cellist Ingrid Fisher-Bellman). This piece has many brief solos that pass between the voices of the ensemble, but the best parts were in the fuller orchestral textures that Dvorak calls for. And, it was in this quintet that Bella's sound seemed to really open up as she soared over the thick textures created by members of the Ronen Chamber Ensemble. Especially touching was the slow movement which begins like a sweet lullaby. Then, as the phrases evolve and emerge we see this piece is not a song for children at all, but a sentimental and lush piece full of passionate lyricism. A satisfying ending to a beautiful concert.