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## ESO's all-American program is an unqualified success

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**BY DOROTHY ANDRIES Classical Music Critic**

It doesn't get much better than the Evanston Symphony Orchestra concert at Northwestern University's Lawrence Pick-Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston Feb. 8. The house was virtually packed, the work of a first-class American composer was receiving its Illinois premiere, past CEO of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra was the afternoon's emcee, and a classical/pop superstar was guest soloist.

The community orchestra, which boasts more than 100 players, was conducted by Eckerling. He is now in his sixth season and this concert was another example of the dramatic rise in the orchestra's quality since he stepped up to the podium.

The state-wide premiere was "Chasing Light..." by American composer Joseph Schwantner. He is the second composer honored with a "Made in America" commission, a project spearheaded by the League of American Orchestras, Meet the Composer, and the Ford Made in America Foundation, which resulted in the work being played by 58 orchestras in all 50 states this season.

The piece was accompanied by Schwantner's eight-line poem describing sunrise in rural New England. His drama of daybreak, however, could be grasped without the words.

Like Kipling's dawn, the piece opened with the thunder of drums, followed by tumbling brass and humming strings. The score was a bevy of action verbs propelled forward like an express train.

Just as suddenly, the composer showered us with quixotic, dappled light -- appearing in patches, suddenly gone, then back again in diverse shapes.

Out of punishing passages from the ESO strings came a luminous satin-like sheen which captured the glow of morning -- much as Debussy captured the movement of the sea in "La Mer. reminiscent of the ensemble's work years ago under its late music director Frank Miller, then principal cello of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Schwantner used the full orchestra for the dense work, with charming touches by keyboardist Susan Arron throughout. This stunning piece, like dawn, promised hope, freedom and even perhaps salvation with its fresh new light.

After intermission emcee Henry Fogel spoke briefly to the audience about the artificial separation between popular and classical music. "There are only two kinds of music," he insisted, "good music and bad music." He then introduced violin/fiddle virtuoso Mark O'Connor, whose performances of his compositions evoking Appalachian folk-like melodies has made him a superstar.

O'Connor did not disappoint us. His fiddle -- which is actually a violin played with a different technique -- sounded as earthy as a hoe-down and as dreamy as a love song. He was soloist in the Finale of his Fiddle Concerto, his beloved "Appalachia Waltz" and his "Fanfare for the Volunteer." Often he turned toward the violins and played as one of them.

The "Fanfare" called for some fancy duets between him and ESO concertmaster Julian Arron, who held his own admirably. We remembered that that this orchestra is one of the volunteer organizations that so enriches the musical life of our communities.

The audience cheered O'Connor and coaxed an encore from him -- an intricate version of "Amazing Grace," which segued into a lean rendering of "America the Beautiful."

The concert opened with William Schuman's arrangement of Charles Ives' "Variations on "America," followed by Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings," properly setting up this spectacular all-American afternoon.