

Chen radiant, refined in program in Atlanta

REVIEW

By PIERRE RUHE

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ATLANTA — Mei-Ann Chen is on a steep ascent, and it must seem like a giddy ride.

In her two years as the Atlanta Symphony's assistant conductor, starting in 2007, she scored major triumphs in concerts of sophisticated repertoire. This won her high praise from critics and, more importantly, from the orchestra's demanding musicians, who do not suffer fools on the podium quietly.

At 36, still young for a conductor, Chen's career continues to zoom forward. Earlier this month, she was named the Memphis Symphony Orchestra's music director.

Over the weekend, she returned to Atlanta Symphony Hall not as an apprentice but as a full-fledged guest maestra. She will need to start championing music by contemporary composers if she's to continue her artistic growth, but for this concert

her program was all comfort food: high-calorie and deeply satisfying. There was a thematic link, too: Each of the three works borrow someone else's music and transforms it into something radiant and new.

Chen set Paul Hindemith's "Symphonic Metamorphosis," from 1943, in the context of the centuries-old central European tradition. This music can be gloriously erratic: You'll find yourself carried along by a hummable little tune that suddenly veers off course and stops with a jolt — akin to a Salvador Dali painting, where a normal-looking clock bends over an abyss. By rounding the corners and smoothing the bumps, Chen and the orchestra made it music of weird, or perhaps frisky, romanticism.

Sergei Rachmaninoff's "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini," mini piano concerto in all but name, is a staple of Atlanta Symphony programming.

With noted Canadian pianist Jon Kimura Parker, Chen led the most refined,

the most searching, performance I've ever heard. The ASO has always played beautifully for Chen. Their rapport with Parker was exquisite; the whole thing crackled with spontaneity.

As an assistant in Atlanta, Chen was at her most convincing in the beefy classics. Here she was on form for Antonin Dvorak's Symphony No. 8, inspired by Czech folk tunes. Her interpretation didn't need to be especially original — the sturdy architecture, rich lyricism and dark-wood tint of the music resists too fussy a reading.

Yet Chen and company offered many small mementos. They waltzed through the third movement with a mix of joy and abandon and regret — a mature, wise world view that helps explain Chen's impressive career ascent. Be forewarned, Memphis: You'll have to work very hard to meet her standards.

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