

**Michael Stern**  
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**IRIS swells into Ode to Joy**  
**Glorious music lifts listeners into ecstasy**

The IRIS Chamber Orchestra delivered a stunning holiday gift over the weekend.

*Maestro Michael Stern's* program at the Germantown Performing Arts Centre was an even bigger, grander manifestation of IRIS's mission to combine old favorites and contemporary challenges, including, as he put it at Sunday afternoon's performance, "music we helped to create."

The blowout work was Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with a larger than usual orchestra plus the local Gary Beard Chorale plus four world class soloists crowding the stage and staggering the crowd with a vigorous, heartfelt performance.

The familiar Ninth -- famously called the Ode to Joy -- is the ultimate feel-good work, superlative in its passion and art, enormous in scope and theme. *Stern* pulled orchestra and chorus together with all those elements into a greatly satisfying performance, even if it fell short of perfection. The sopranos in the chorus sometimes veered into overenthusiasm and the orchestra once or twice showed a rough edge. The vivid performances of the soloists, however, were jaw-dropping, particularly those of the luminous soprano Alexandra Deshorties and powerful bass-baritone Nathan Berg.

Taken in its entirety, this rendition of the Ninth was brisk yet powerful with youthful energy and a full measure of integrity. And that trumps a slight lack of precision any day.

While the Ninth would have been sufficient in itself, IRIS offered a splendid first half that ought not be overshadowed by Beethoven's biggie.

The orchestra commissioned Maryland composer Jonathan Leshnoff, whose first symphony, *Forgotten Chants and Refrains*, received its world premiere this weekend at GPAC. Leshnoff cited influences of Dufay from the 15th Century, Rossi from the 17th Century and Gregorian chants as shaping the work. Yet it is distinctly contemporary and had suggestions of Gershwin, Penderecki, Cage and Bernstein. It is a fluid, thoughtful work, superbly textured and unafraid to be intellectual.

The concert opened with Beethoven's *Elegiac Song for Chorus and Strings*, Op. 118, a delicate, sweet and sad expression. For all its brevity, *Stern*, orchestra and chorus made it the beauty of the day.