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Palo Alto Chamber Orchestra packs a big punch

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The Palo Alto Chamber Orchestra performed a program spanning three centuries — from Baroque to modern — for the last concert of its season at the Spangenberg Theatre in Palo Alto last weekend. This excellent small orchestra, which has cradled a number of excellent young professional prospects since it was founded by William Whitson 39 years ago, has been polished to a professional luster by Music Director Ben Simon. It is another one of those remarkable youth orchestras that have made the Peninsula one of the finest showcases of young musical talent in the country. In contrast to full-scale youth orchestras of more than 100 performers, chamber orchestras are just what the name implies: smaller scale ensembles for smaller scale music performed in small venues. The Palo Alto Chamber Orchestra has only 30 strings — violins, violas, celli and bass — supported by one flute, two oboes, two bassoons and two French horns. Precision and beauty of timbre are the goals, not the bombast of full symphony orchestras. So open is this music that any weak performing member would stand out. But this chamber orchestra is select: It has no weak members. The program included two entrees from the great German-English composer George Frideric Handel, famed for his great Water Music for the King of England. These were the "Samson Overture" and the "Entrance of The Queen of Sheba from 'Soloman.'" They were marred a bit by some tentative French horn entrances, but on the whole were superb for such a small ensemble. A treat for the evening was a rarely heard "Concerto da Camera," a 1948 work by the Swiss-French composer Arthur Honegger for an unusual combination — strings, flute and English horn. The soloists were two adults, and they were extraordinary. Flautist Greer Ellison has one of the richest tones — especially in the lower register — and the most beautifully controlled vibratos I have ever heard. And Peter Lemberg performed the miracle of converting the naturally nasal tones of the English horn into rich and round melodic lines. Alumna cellist Dahna Rudin may have stolen the evening as guest soloist in the late Lou Harrison's 20th century beauties "Suites for Cello and String Orchestra." Artistry is most often exposed in slower movements, and Rudin showed herself to be a complete musician, drawing from her cello a singing timbre — often compared to the human voice — that captured the unique beauty of form, harmony and melodic lines of that rare creature, a composer appreciated in his own times. A real treat. The evening closed with the small scale Symphony No. 5 in B Flat Major, d. 485 (1818) by Franz Schubert, which Director Simon calls his favorite Schubert symphony. And I can understand why. It is perfect for a chamber orchestra. Its Mozartian influences make us wonder whether, as some argue, Schubert would have rivalled Mozart in stature if he had only lived past 31. You won't get blown out of an auditorium by a good chamber orchestra, but you will get some relaxed comfort basking in its beauty.