

The bland and the beautiful

By IFAN PAYNE
Music Critic

The glory of the Toulouse Chamber Orchestra is the tonal richness of the sound that it produces and also the unanimity of the tonal production.

When this ensemble is at its best, as it was during its performance in McCain Auditorium on Tuesday evening of the third movement *Elegie* of Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for String Orchestra*, it becomes difficult to conceive of a more ravishing string tone.

On the other hand a weakness of the ensemble is a tendency toward less than perfect intonation, as in the first movement of Rossini's *Sonata No.3 for Strings*. This would not matter too much if such lapses came as a result of straining after interpretative nuance or of striving for tension in the musical line. But for all the seductive sounds, much of the performance by the Toulouse Chamber Orchestra was interpretatively bland.

During the concert interval, an acquaintance commented on the wonderful sound of the orchestra.

"It sounds almost as good as the record!" she quipped.

It so happened that the sound of the orchestra had bothered me at first. McCain Auditorium has both fine, and at the same time *interesting*, acoustics. Over the years, I have

noticed that a solo piano sounds wonderful in the hall, for example, but a full chorus singing from the back of the stage somehow seems to lack power and impact.

During the first half of Tuesday's concert, the orchestra sounded diffused and unfocused, and I wondered whether this was a function of having the full stage open, the roof raised and of not using the shell. I moved back during the interval and for the second half of the concert I sat in a seat nearer the rear of the auditorium and the quality of sound was noticeably better in terms of focus and blend. (I am writing here of the acoustics of the hall, and not of the tonal quality of the orchestra which was excellent throughout.)

My move was a good one also because the more interesting part of the concert occurred during the second half, of which the first work was the *Concerto for Flute* by the diletante Andre Jolivet.

The composer tried his hand at writing, acting and painting before turning, almost by accident, to music. The robust *Concerto for Flute* was composed in 1949, and it was performed with suitable vigor by both the orchestra and by Michel Debost as the flute soloist. Mr. Debost had earlier shown his solid technique and

beautiful tone in two of Vivaldi's flute concerti.

The concluding work on the program was Tchaikovsky's delightful *Serenade for Strings*. This is a deceptive work. It sounds simple, but is in fact difficult to play, as was evident in the untidiness of ensemble during the second movement waltz. The performance of the *Serenade* brought out both the best of the ensemble, as in the hushed simplicity of the *Elegie*, and also provided an excellent example of the interpretative limitations of the orchestra.

There is in the last movement a carefully notated crescendo and diminuendo for plucked strings that imitate the sound of balalaikas joining in the swirling Russian march-like themes.

In the performance on Tuesday evening, the balalaikas were barely noticeable, and the whole delightful incident went for naught.

The Toulouse Chamber Orchestra made a lovely sound that was rich and sonorous, but the cultivation of that beauty of sound seems all too often to get in the way of interpretative insight, nuance and risk so that the evening slipped by easily and pleasurably but, rather like the experience of eating and enjoying a Twinkie, I came to the end and still felt in need of something substantial.

The Manhattan Mercury A7
Wednesday, March 30, 1983