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## Cello rules the day

(<http://www.pioneerlocal.com/northbrook/entertainment/755677,dn-nbcello-012408-s1.article>)

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The cello reigned supreme Sunday afternoon when the Northbrook Symphony Orchestra presented "Homage to the Past," the third concert in its five-concert season at the Sheely Center for the Performing Arts at Glenbrook North High School in Northbrook. Soloist was Joseph Johnson, principal cellist of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, who was raised in Northbrook and appeared on the Sheely Center stage often when he was a student at Glenbrook North.

The program was built around the cellist and, for those who enjoy knowing such things, his 1792 cello was made in Naples by luthier Nicola Gagliano.

Conductor and music director Larry Rapchak, whose programming continues to inspire and delight, was not content to let his soloist simply perform one work. Instead, he selected a whopping three pieces, one of which -- Respighi's Adagio and Variations for Cello and Orchestra -- Johnson learned especially for the concert.

The centerpiece of the program was -- no surprise -- Tchaikovsky's masterpiece "Variations on a Rococo Theme," a much-loved staple of the symphonic repertoire. It fit tidily into the concert's theme, since it was a homage to Mozart, whom Tchaikovsky admired greatly. It was performed in the composer's original 1876 version, which, if anything, was even more profoundly varied and colorful than the more commonly heard version.

Johnson opened with a light touch, his bow often flying over the strings, brisk and cheery. In this piece, however, Tchaikovsky never stays cheerful too long, preferring instead multiple mood swings and intense contrasts between light and darkness..

The soloist and his sonorous cello were equal to the task, and he gave a serious, deliberate reading to eloquent, velvety passages, as if he wanted to make sure the audience understood their beauty. Rapchak was a sensitive conductor throughout, letting Johnson shine and leading the orchestra in attentive accompaniment. It was altogether a fine performance.

Johnson also played Glazunov's "Song of the Minstrel," which was, as we expect of that romantic Russian, a dreamy piece for cello and orchestra.

In the Respighi, whose "Pines of Rome" is certainly on many most-popular lists, we heard the composer's wider range. Very skilled at writing sumptuously beautiful music, he was also interested in Gregorian chant, subtly evoking it in the variations.

It is a treasure of a piece and received a splendid performance. At one point the cello was paired with the English horn, and player Eric Pierce deftly navigated the turns and twists in harmony with Johnson.

The Northbrook Symphony Orchestra was in excellent form, sounding especially good in the grand finale, "Variations on a Theme by Haydn," by Johannes Brahms. The piece was actually based on a composition Haydn wrote for a band of wind instruments, and the orchestra's wind players did outstanding work.

The variations were short and sometimes mystifying and not at all predictable. At one point the melody emerged only in its harmonies, as if someone was playing from a cheat sheet. Sometimes it was clothed in minor mode, sometimes it flew by, and sometimes it served to present various sections of the orchestra in high relief.

The afternoon was most satisfying, illustrating again the importance of this orchestra to the community and the North Shore.

The orchestra's next concert at 4 p.m. Feb. 17 at Sheely Center, will be an all-Mozart program of Symphony No. 10 and No. 41 ("Jupiter"), plus the Clarinet Concerto with John Bruce Yeh, assistant principal clarinet of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. For more information, visit [www.northbrooksymphony.org](http://www.northbrooksymphony.org).



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