

MSO celebrates season

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Christmas came early for McKeesport Symphony Orchestra fans in the form of a medley of medleys of holiday tunes.

And because it's the time of year young people wait for, MSO welcomed youthful listeners to take part in the program titled "Christmas Brass."

Actually, the kids formed an audience-within-the-audience for the least-brassy part of Saturday evening, a reading of "Twas the Night Before Christmas" by WTAE anchorman Mike Clark. The personable Clark (who earlier had sprinted up the aisle to deliver a prize) called the young people down to the pit where he perched with his script.

It was a tough spot to be in, because guest conductor Bruce Lauffer was above and behind him, making it tough for Clark to catch his cues, but St. Nick went back up the chimney without any problem.

Program began with a reverential presentation of Leroy Anderson's familiar "A Christmas Festival," which is built on yule favorites like "Silent Night" (more dream-like than usual) to "Jingle Bells," played at a tempo a real horse might keep.

Speaking of which, Bagley's "Christmas Medley"

Review

McKeesport Symphony
Orchestra
Where: McKeesport Area
High School auditorium

(on which the orchestra loosened up) ends with "Jingle Bells," but only after bits of Prokofiev's "Troika" and Bizet's "Farandole." Oddly enough, that strange amalgam works.

Because of the concert's title, Lauffer often cited contributions by members of the brass section, actually naming the players, which was refreshing (if other team players can be identified, why not musicians?) The brass quintet was featured in Bocook's "Christmas Sketches," which was notable for the martial aspect given to "Do You Hear What I Hear."

First half also included a relatively ancient tune that's come to be included in the Christmas carol canon, Vaughan Williams' take on "Greensleeves" that incorporates a central sea shanty section.

Back to brass. "Bugler's Holiday" welcomed what's always the largest crowd of the year back from the break for a burst of fun. That was followed by Clark's narration. (Where was the WTAE camera to prove hometown coverage?)

"A Charlie Brown Christmas" reminded listeners to

focus on the cartoon's soundtrack when it airs next season; we know the dominant themes, but the others deserve more attention. This particular arrangement was a little ponderous, though.

Happily, it was followed by North Versailles Twp.'s Ashley King, whose rich, warm voice powered "The Very Best Time of Year" (hopefully the MSO will have her back).

MSO Chorus Director Yugo Sava Ikach took over podium duty (Lauffer, like Ikach, is being considered for the orchestra's music director post; announcement is expected within a few weeks) for "A Christmas Garland," another medley that included both choral presentation and audience sing-along.

The "Garland" was made up of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," "I Saw Three Ships," "We Three Kings" and "O Come All Ye Faithful." The medley featured some interesting arrangements that were worth being heard once.

The annual holiday show always includes a regulation sing-along, and that sing-along continued with "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," "Rudolph" and "I'll Be Home for Christmas."

As is traditional, the audience rose to its feet as Ikach led his chorus through the "Hallelujah Chorus."

Good show, especially when capped off with cookies.