

Mozart, Mahler, Burning Bright

Santa Rosa Symphony

By Steve Osborn

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How many performances of the “Jupiter” Symphony does it take to turn on a light bulb above the head of attentive listeners? In the case of the Santa Rosa Symphony, it only takes one. Despite a few minor flaws, its rendition of this beloved classic on Saturday at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts was incandescent, glowing with the warm light that Mozart sheds over Earth and other planets.

With his precise style and brisk tempos, Music Director Bruno Ferrandis is a natural Mozart conductor.

Glancing only occasionally at a diminutive pocket score, he flew right into the opening Allegro vivace, bidding the strings to dig in and articulate the notes with precision and rapidity. He loomed over the orchestra like a hawk, spreading his arms to ride the waves of sound and then diving forward suddenly to summon each new entry. The call-and-response orchestration was clearly audible, with each phrase matching its counterpart.

The tension of the first movement gave way to the singing Andante of the second. Ferrandis lowered his shoulders considerably, and the orchestra responded with a more relaxed and open sound, marred only by a lack of dynamic contrast. The third movement, a minuet, brought even more changes, with unexpected ritards in certain measures, followed by strong downbeats. The violins offered some particularly agile bowing, mixing fluid down bows with spiky upstrokes.

The fourth movement was both the most impressive and the most problematic. Ferrandis and the orchestra did a great job of bringing out all the many disparate parts, but some of the entries were ragged and uncertain. The woodwinds, in particular, seemed to have trouble following Ferrandis’ beat, occasionally entering late and rushing their notes. The overall effect, though, was wonderful.

Wonderful also was the concert-opening overture to Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*, rendered at an equally brisk pace with good ensemble playing from the strings. Unlike many orchestra programs, the overture was followed by an aria from the actual opera: “Porgi, amor,” sung by soprano Christine Brandes. She wasted no time in displaying her full, rounded voice, crescendoing effortlessly into high notes with a carefully controlled vibrato. She has a gorgeous sound perfectly suited to the aria, which is sung by the unhappy Countess at the beginning of the second act.

Soaring Songs

Brandes returned after intermission to sing the *Seven Early Songs* by Alban Berg. While not as well-known as his *Altenberg Lieder*, the songs do show the composer’s remarkable feeling for drama and soaring melody. Yet their scoring is a bit murky, probably because they were originally conceived for voice and piano and orchestrated much later to capitalize on Berg’s operatic fame.

While Brandes sang well, she undercut her own stage presence by using a score. This was a little mystifying, given her many operatic roles, but perhaps she didn't have time to memorize the music. In any case, her German articulation was not as precise as her Italian in the Mozart aria, and her lower notes were often swallowed by the orchestra. Balance was a problem in the outer movements, which call for a larger orchestra, but she hit her stride in the less orchestrated middle movements, particularly in the third song, "The Nightingale," where she displayed great strength in her upper register.

In contrast to the Mozart, the Berg songs were all slow-moving, rarely rising above a strolling Andante. The pace slowed even more for the final work on the program, the Adagio from Mahler's incomplete 10th Symphony. Here the soaring vocal lines of the Berg were replaced by long figures from the strings, most notably the violas. They begin the movement all by themselves, playing an ambient melody that floats around a tonal center without ever settling down. The performance here was exquisite, with cohesive ensemble and not a single note or bow out of place.

After the violas' memorable entrance, the rest of the orchestra took turns pouring out Mahler's viscous score. The forces are immense, but the work often has a chamber feeling, with only one or two lines unfolding. Mahler moves from one idea to the next, never settling into any definite direction. The entire movement seems to be composed of dying cadences, each one projecting an aura of finality, only to be replaced by another cadence that seems even more final.

Toward the end, the orchestra settled briefly into a triumphant waltz, followed by a series of memorable duets. When the movement finally did end, the sound moved upward from the cellos and bassoons to a shrill (and slightly out of tune) utterance from the piccolo. While not quite a bang, it was a fitting end for Mahler's for otherwise dark and brooding masterpiece.

All in all, the Santa Rosa Symphony's concert offered quite a contrast, from the vivacity of Mozart to the tortured melancholy of Mahler and Berg. Nonetheless, the light bulb burned brightly throughout.

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