

Santa Rosa Symphony impresses with Beethoven's Ninth

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The Santa Rosa Symphony under Music Director Bruno Ferrandis took the audience on a journey from darkness to light Saturday evening, capping off the decade with Beethoven's life-affirming Symphony No. 9.

The last time the symphony performed this uplifting work was in October 2001, when former Music Director Jeffrey Kahane programmed it at the last minute. Those performances, dedicated to the victims of the Sept. 11 attacks, gave the community a chance to come together and experience the healing power of music.

This time around, the beloved work once again provided a sense of community and drew a wide range of audience members beyond the usual symphony subscribers.

"My husband dropped by earlier this evening for tickets, so it was last minute," said Birgette Lana of Santa Rosa, who brought her 5-year-old daughter Madelin. We like to take our daughter to concerts."

Sean Ely, a junior at Petaluma High, came to hear his trumpet teacher play in the orchestra. "I've always wanted to hear Beethoven's Ninth," he said.

Other audience members came to support friends and family singing in the Santa Rosa Symphony Honor Choir, a 150-voice choir drawn from the Sonoma County Bach Choir led by Robert Worth, the Santa Rosa Symphonic Choir directed by Daniel Earl and the Montgomery High School Chamber Singers led by Dana Alexander.

The Ninth Symphony is hard to beat in terms of soul-searching honesty and emotional depth, and under the experienced baton of Ferrandis, the symphony delivered all of that and more.

"I almost felt like Beethoven was conducting it," said Linda McLaughlin, after the 74-minute work came to a close after intermission.

"This is the first time I've ever heard it performed live ... and it's amazing," said John Katchmer of Sebastopol. "It takes a really good conductor to pull it off. How do you hold it all together?"

Although this was Ferrandis' first performance of the work, the conductor had obviously done his homework, creating a propulsive interpretation that was blazingly intense and exciting.

In the first movement, with its opening statement emphasizing harmony instead of melody, the strings sounded clean and crisp, especially in the lightening-quick scales.

It was during the scherzo, however, that the orchestra really hit its groove, picking up Ferrandis' exhilarating tempo and dancing with it.

In the timeless adagio, Ferrandis coaxed dramatic dynamics out of the orchestra, and the horns delivered their arpeggios with flawless technique.

Ferrandis conquered the tricky fourth movement like a general leading his troops into battle, aided by a solid corps of vocal soloists. Baritone Joseph Wiggett stood out for his terrific diction and warm tone.

The choir bounced through the finale with obvious gusto, and everyone's efforts were rewarded with enthusiastic applause.

The concert, which drew nearly a full house, opened with Igor Stravinsky's austere and aloof "Symphony of Psalms," regarded as one of the great sacred works of modern music.

The work provided a nice foil to the Beethoven, because it was unfamiliar to many, but its dissonance tested singers and listeners alike.

"I thought it was very interesting, and I'd like to hear it again," said Larry Shapiro of Sebastopol. "It would take about six listenings to get used to it."

Throughout the concert, the sound of the orchestra seemed to lack resonance. Perhaps this was in honor of Stravinsky, who preferred a drier sound, but it didn't serve the music well, especially during the Beethoven.

The Santa Rosa Symphony will repeat Saturday's program at 8 p.m. Monday at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts in Santa Rosa.