

## **A little night music from the Santa Rosa Symphony**

### **Romantic program crackles with vibrant imagery**

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The Santa Rosa Symphony under Director Bruno Ferrandis brightened the dark, rainy skies Saturday night with an array of Romantic works flooded with brilliant tones and vibrant images.

The program was ideal for a mid-winter weekend when movie buffs were focusing on the 81st annual Academy Awards. Each of the four pieces would work as a soundtrack, and all were programmatic music, inspired by a story or poem, place or painting.

If there was a best picture award, it would have to go to Claude Debussy's "Nocturnes" for Orchestra, which closed the concert with a big splash of color.

This is one of the most popular of Debussy's major works, but with its awkward key signatures and conflicting meters, it's not an easy one to pull off.

Under Ferrandis' clear baton, however, the full orchestra painted all three tone pictures — "Nuages," "Fetes" and "Sirenes" — with moody nuance, frenetic energy and shimmering sound.

Best supporting role goes to the members of the Sonoma County Bach Choir led by Robert Worth, who sang the wordless, eight-part women's choir in "Sirenes" with eerie allure.

Best actor for the evening would have to go to pianist Garrick Ohlsson, a legend who performed not one but two virtuoso piano works before and after intermission.

The pianist, a gentle giant at 6-foot-4, is a towering figure as well in the classical music world. After studying at Juilliard, he launched his career by winning the International Frederic Chopin Piano Competition, beating out such competitors as Emanuel Ax.

Living full time in San Francisco since 1996, Ohlsson has a massive repertoire of about 80e concertos that he plays with orchestras all over the world. This was his first time playing with the Santa Rosa Symphony, and we can only hope it won't be his last.

Before intermission, Ohlsson wrapped his agile fingers around Carl Maria von Weber's "Konzertstuck" for Piano and Orchestra, a virtuosic vehicle along the lines of Franz Lizst's piano works.

Sitting still at the piano, his large shoulders barely moving, Ohlsson polished off the piece's tricky arpeggios, chromatic runs and trills with a rock-solid left hand and poetic pacing. The flashy piece ended with a flourish, and the crowd jumped to its feet, whistling and whooping in appreciation.

The better showcase for Ohlsson's prodigious talent, however, came after intermission, with Manuel De Falla's evocative "Nights in the Gardens of Spain."

During the concerto-like piece, the piano and orchestra share the spotlight in a close collaboration similar to a love scene. Ohlsson approached the work with ease and assurance, while the symphony under Ferrandis gave sensitive support, especially with dynamics.

Saturday's program, loosely organized around the theme of nighttime, opened with one of Arnold Schoenberg's most enduring chamber works, "Transfigured Night," arranged for string orchestra.

The strings made a noble effort, and the solos shone through, especially those of acting principal violist Meg Titchener, but the Wagnerian work lacked clarity and often got lost in the muddy acoustics of the hall.

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