

Review: Santa Rosa Symphony ends season with a bang

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The Santa Rosa Symphony under Music Director Bruno Ferrandis brought its season to a close Saturday night with an explosive display of orchestral colors that ranged from sweetly melodic to harshly dissonant — and everything in between.

The wide-ranging program was unified under the themes of ecstatic love, death and religious mysticism. It was not a concert for Beethoven lovers, but it presented a rare, once-in-a-life opportunity to hear a ground-breaking work by a unique and compelling 20th-century composer.

After intermission, Ferrandis marshaled the forces of a massive orchestra to present three movements from Messiaen's Turangalila Symphony. In addition to extra brass and a large percussion section, guest artist Miles Graber performed the challenging piano part and Mary Chun played the ondes Martenot.

In the pre-concert lecture, Chun demonstrated her spooky-sounding instrument - recognizable from "The Twilight Zone" and other 190s sci-fi films — and its array of electronic effects, from eerie vibrato to otherworldly slides.

"There's no music like it in the world, since or before," Chun said of the Turangalila Symphony, a trenchant but apt description.

In his first full season with the Santa Rosa Symphony in 2007, Ferrandis introduced Messiaen with a short work, "A Smile," the French composer's sunny tribute to Mozart.

This time around, the audience was served up Messiaen as the main entree, and it was a lot to digest. Knowing this, the symphony wisely invited UCLA scholar Robert Winter to explain the work, both at the pre-concert lecture and at the performance.

While Winter's lecture and demonstration proved edifying, his comical, lightning-speed delivery never quite seemed to hit the right note. So it was a relief when he finally stepped aside and let the symphony take over.

Under Ferrandis, the orchestra built an impressive wall of sound that washed over the audience in waves. The first two movements — “Turangalila” and “Love Song” — were reminiscent of Ives, with transparent layers of sound often overlapping and clashing.

But the big pay-off came with the final movement — “Joy of the Stars’ Blood” — a lively and lilting dance that boasted pleasant repetition, punctuated by jazzy and angular rhythms.

It would be difficult to single out any one section or artist in the “Turangalila” — it was such an impressive ensemble effort — but pianist Graber provided a rock-solid foundation and lent a welcome touch of wry humor to the lecture/demonstration.

Before intermission, pianist Cecile Licad brought similar mastery to Ravel’s Concerto in G major, displaying a natural ease and athleticism in the work’s outer movements.

Her simple and restrained playing in the work’s slow movement was exquisitely elegant but came across as emotionally flat, as if the music’s emotional depth was hiding under its exquisite style.

More compelling were the sweeping strings and sweet brass melodies of Wagner’s “Nachtgesang” from the opera “Tristan and Isolde,” which opened the program.

I’ve never been a fan of this long-winded opera composer and his meandering melodies, but with Ferrandis’ phrasing and dynamics, we all could become believers.

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

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