

San Francisco Classical Voice

# Persian Myths and a Polish Romantic

by Marianne Lipanovich

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Music has always had a way of bridging gaps between cultures and bringing people closer together. So in this time of increased tension in the Middle East, it may be appropriate that the Santa Rosa Symphony will be performing the world premiere of a piece based on ancient Persian mythology. This may give a Western audience both a new and beautiful piece of music to enjoy in and of itself, and more insight into the cultural and religious influences of a region of the world not always well understood by the West.

The premiere piece, *Mithra*, is by Iranian-born composer and Juilliard faculty member Behzad Ranjbaran. A colleague and friend of Santa Rosa Symphony Music Director Bruno Ferrandis, Ranjbaran is a prolific composer who has been praised for his strong musical themes, colorful melodies, and neo-Romantic style. His previous works include orchestral pieces, choral compositions, chamber ensembles, and instrumental solos.

While Ranjbaran has never limited himself in terms of themes, *Mithra* follows in the footsteps of an earlier work, *Persian Trilogy*. The previous piece was based on Persian legends; *Mithra* was inspired by an ancient Persian deity in the 3,000-year-old Zoroastrian religion, which dominated the region until the rise of Islam.

The work came about as part of the Magnum Opus commissioning project, established in 2003 as part of the Meet the Composer project at the Metropolitan Opera. The program was designed as a way to encourage contemporary classical composers and introduce both them and their music to classical audiences around the country. This year, four pieces will be premiered, in such diverse settings as Nashville, Tenn., and Marin, Calif., in addition to this performance in Santa Rosa. The Santa Rosa Symphony is an old hand at this, having been one of the original orchestras involved in commissioning new works. Ranjbaran and Ferrandis also were among the first participants in the program.

As if a Persian-based premiere doesn't offer enough unusual flavor to a classical evening, the featured soloist is the one-name pianist Berenika, who is such a dramatic presence on stage that, really, no further name is needed. The Polish-born Canadian musician's past accomplishments include acclaimed performances in North and South America and in Europe; notable recordings; and degrees from Harvard and Christ Church, Oxford University. She will be returning to her roots, performing Chopin's Piano Concert No. 2 in honor of the 200th anniversary of the composer's birth. Berenika was a child prodigy who first soloed at age 9, and she is considered one of the best young musicians in classical music today.

Not to leave out another birthday celebrant, two pieces by Schumann round out the program. June marks the 200th anniversary of his birth, and his "Manfred" Overture and D-Minor Symphony are always a joy to hear.

For a unique blend of old and new, and a chance to hear both music and a performer who represent today's interpretation of classical music, a good place to start would be Santa Rosa.

**Marianne Lipanovich is writer and editor based in Redwood City. A gardening expert, she is a lifelong music lover, having learned to read music before she learned to read.**