



Behzad Ranjbaran

Three Hits and a Miss at SRSO Concert

by [Terry McNeill](#)

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In the fifth set of Santa Rosa Symphony concerts in the current season, conductor Bruno Ferrandis programmed a world premiere and ended with a familiar Schumann symphony. In between were Chopin's F Minor Piano Concerto, Op. 21, with soloist Berenika Zakrzewski, and Schumann's "Manfred" overture.

Behzad Ranjbaran's "Mithra" was the premiere, part of the Magnum Opus series of new works commissioned by a Silicon Valley philanthropist and played subsequently by three Bay Area orchestras. It was a fetching composition, with fine playing from the Orchestra and good control of sonic balance from Ferrandis. In three sections, beginning with a haunting flute solo by Kathleen Lane Reynolds, the work spotlights low-register strings, with many short motives competing for prominence. Bits, but only bits, of Shostakovich orchestra color populate the first section, the woodwind slides intriguing and combining with piquant notes from marimba. The middle section, faster and with no less intensity than the opening part, was energetically played. Ranjbaran has a consummate command of orchestration and instrumental color.

After two sets of what can be called four-note "thuds," a lyrical harp solo from Randall Pratt introduced a lofty flute passage, creating a bucolic effect with the violins playing with diminished vibrato. The final chords, carefully paced by Ferrandis, magically brought the 15-minute piece to a gentle end. Reynolds' sui generis work with the flute is a pillar of the Orchestra. One wonders why she hasn't played a formal recital here in many years. Are there any flute recitals anymore?

Berenika (the stage name she prefers to use) was less than impressive in the Chopin concerto, a luscious composition built on thematic design from the Italian operas the composer loved. Mostly she didn't have a musical clue of the subtlety and lyrical richness of the work, and for this writer it was the least professional performance of a concerto heard within memory in Wells. Looking back to past SRSO performances of standard repertoire, Lang Lang camped and banged his way through the Rachmaninoff Third many years ago, but understood the grandeur of the work. More recently Jonathan Biss played a boring Schumann A Minor Concerto, at least until the finale, but understood the composer's rhythmic delights.

Here the tempos Ferrandis used, nearly throughout, generated muddy passages in fast scales

from Berenika and lack of cogent phrasing. The reading was as fast as the ne plus ultra of Op. 21 recordings, the Hofmann/Barbirolli/NY Philharmonic from 1938, even though Barbirolli takes a long cut in the orchestra introduction. There never was a really adept use of pianistic rubato in the entire performance. But the lack of lyricism in Chopin's beguiling themes was the key defect of Berenika's playing. An example of this could be found at measure 306, in the apex of the cadenza, where Chopin writes a descending right-hand *detaché* figure followed immediately by florid 16-note phrase, each tone worthy of attention and meaning. Berenika simply played through it without any thought to its majesty and expressive character. It was also difficult to hear her bass chords, even the final one in F Minor after the right hand trill.

The enchanting *Larghetto*, perhaps Chopin's most sublime concerted movement, proceeded at a more relaxed pace, but here again the soloist tended to rush into each phrase, missing the tenderness that makes the movement a connoisseur's favorite, and even the subject of several solo transcriptions. Berenika played "on top" of the keys, never getting an opulent sound from the instrument. The finale (*Allegro vivace*) was the best of the night's playing. The right-hand skips were nailed, and there was rhythmic interest in this rollicking Rondo. But it was still small-scale playing, pedaling covering clarity in scales, the whole sounding like an conservatory student in a rehearsal run-through.

Schumann's large orchestral works clearly are close to Ferrandis' heart. In the second half, he conducted the Op. 115 "Manfred" Overture in E-Flat Major, Op. 115, and the grand D Minor Symphony, the Fourth, Op. 120. Both benefited by the conductor's sense of the "long line" needed to carry Schumann's more somber symphonic pieces. So different from the joyous "Rhenish" Third Symphony, the D Minor only has joy in the concluding *Langsam-Lebhaft*, but under Ferrandis' baton the music was riveting. Flutist Stacy Pelinka was a perfect match for her section mate Reynolds in the energetic opening movement. Acting principal cellist Robin Bonell opened the A Minor *Romanze* with a lovely solo, the Orchestra then playing to the solo violin passages of Concertmaster Joseph Edelberg.

In the final two movements Ferrandis essentially abandoned looking at the score in front of him, his identification with Schumann's vitality was so thorough. He has a sweeping ability to balance sectional resonance and volume, difficult to do in both the Symphony and the shorter, convoluted Overture.

The final movement, in D Major, was characterized by fine trumpet playing from Doug Morton and Dan Norris, and equally effective trombone work of Bruce Chrisp, Amy Bowers and Kurt Patzner. The nearly full house provided warm applause to the players, with Ferrandis surely relishing the radiance his artistry brought to two of Schumann's dark but edifying works.