

Berenika adds lustre to Santa Rosa Symphony

By Diane Peterson

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After a two-month hiatus, the Santa Rosa Symphony and its music director, Bruno Ferrandis, were happily reunited on Saturday night as they plunged into an emotionally turbulent program of Romantic music.

The concert, commemorating the 200th birthdays of Romantic composers Robert Schumann and Frederic Chopin, also brought together two old friends: Ferrandis and his former Juilliard classmate, Iranian composer Behzad Ranjbaran, who attended the world premiere of his work "Mithra," the magic carpet ride of a curtain-opener.

But the heart and soul of the Valentine's Weekend program belonged to the Polish-Canadian pianist Berenika, a rising talent boasting rock-solid technique and interpretive depth way beyond her 27 years.

Wearing a royal blue gown shot through with gold threads, the petite pianist brought a brilliant lustre to Chopin's rhapsodic Concerto No. 2 before intermission.

Bent over the keyboard with her long, blond curls cascading down her back, Berenika used every muscle in her pliant fingers and shoulders to execute the fluid passages of this improvisational piece.

A pianist since the age of 3, the artist made her professional debut at age 9 in her hometown with the Sault Symphony Orchestra.

While launching her professional career, she graduated magna cum laude from Harvard in both music and government. She has a masters degree from Christ Church, Oxford University and a post-graduate diploma at the Royal Academy of Music in London.

After the beguiling introduction by the orchestra, the pianist took over the controls of the concerto, driving the first movement and bouncy finale with steely strength and propulsive pacing.

Her gentle genius emerged full-blown in the slow movement, when she accented the work's quiet filigree with understated elegance.

After intermission, the orchestra took over center stage with a satisfying romp through Schumann's breast-beating "Manfred Overture." The bittersweet angst deepened with Schumann's Symphony No. 4, a moody work brightened by brass fanfares, lyrical melodies and sparkling solos for cello/oboe and violin.

Schumann's symphony is regarded as revolutionary in its attempt to unify structure through bridges between movements and repeated themes.

These days, it sounds a bit repetitious but remains charming nevertheless. Ferrandis kept the music fresh with dramatic dynamics and brisk, energetic tempos.

“Mithra,” commissioned by Silicon Valley entrepreneur Kathryn Gould and the Magnum Opus Project, was one of the more exciting new works to be performed by the symphony during the past seven years.

A hybrid of traditional Persian and classical music, “Mithra” kept the audience on the edge of its seat, alternating between blasting trumpets and the music-box tinkling of the harp. Principal flautist Kathleen Reynolds executed the meditative flute solo with poignant beauty.

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.