

Where Comes the Sun?

by Jeff Dunn

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Did the Santa Rosa Symphony on Saturday night live up to part of a public-school student poem, by “Cristobal,” posted in its concert-hall lobby?

Sounds frightful, amazing, destructive. Beethoven, great composer—Music as powerful as the sun.



Ludwig Van and Chris Rouse knock and rock

Two of the three works, as written, could certainly have been in the “frightful, amazing, destructive” category: Christopher Rouse’s percussion concerto, *Der Gerettete Alberich*, which began the concert, and the second half of the evening, which consisted solely of [Beethoven](#)’s most white-hot symphony, the Fifth. In terms of performance, however, it was the Fourth Symphony of Beethoven, which followed the Rouse, that encouraged the most ear-basking on my part.

The concerto, composed in 1998, is one of those rare recent American works that receive not only many repeat performances by various orchestras (more than 25 to date) but also as many international performances as national ones. It’s basically a fantasy from [Wagner](#)’s *Ring* cycle of operas on the many themes associated with the evil dwarf Alberich. (You can guess it’s especially popular in Germany.) Beginning with the final notes of the last opera of the series, *Götterdämmerung*, it presents in three movements moods of the villain, one of the few major characters left alive (*gerettete* = “saved”) at Wagner’s conclusion.

Mood Music

Alberich’s progression is countertherapeutic, from anger (Alberich has lost the ring he’s been pursuing for some 16 hours of opera) to depression — and then, instead of acceptance, to revenge. This reprisal is meted out when the percussionist “Alberich” (in the person of Santa Rosa Symphony principal Allen Biggs) suddenly demolishes Wagner’s gorgeous “sunrise” theme with a fusillade of rock ‘n’ roll riffs followed by frenzies of bashing. It’s all great fun, and you don’t have to know the dozens of quoted Wagner tunes to appreciate it — as proved by the robust cheers and standing ovation that greeted Biggs and guest conductor Barry Jekowsky at the conclusion. One enthusiastic patron told me at intermission, “I never knew how much I loved percussion before!”

I would remark, however, that as fine as Biggs rendition was, I've been spoiled by two previous performers I've heard play in this work, Evelyn Glennie and Colin Currie, both of whom not only play phenomenally well, but also manage to slink around the stage like the operatic, disreputable dwarf. Biggs was more matter-of-fact in his movements, though appropriately, he did sink down out of sight at the very end. What he sank behind was the instrument he altered from the original orchestration that begins and ends the work. It's supposed to be a [guiro](#), but instead Biggs found a neighbor's black plastic drainage pipe that had a more muffled and less raspy sound. I applaud his willingness to experiment, though I like the original better.

Rouse's works are not easy to play, and the notorious Wells Fargo Center for the Arts acoustics could not have been better for declaring his orchestration. The result was that I had to agree, at least in some sections, with another patron who told me the work sounded "discoherent" to her. To those who nevertheless batten on even greater percussive mayhem, I recommend Rouse's opus flagrum, *Gorgon*, with its 75 percussion instruments, including a plywood platform smashed with sledge hammers.

To the Next County

After intermission, when I heard Beethoven's immortal "knocking of fate at the door" that begins the Fifth Symphony, I thought about how its landmark shock to the 1808 audience has been paralleled by other shocks of other groundbreaking works over subsequent music history, now spearheaded by a battery of percussion effects. What will be next? But Jekowsky failed to convey the importance of the 1808 shock to me. His "Fate" was too fast, a UPS man who rings at the door and, before you can open it, disappears into the next county with his truck. While Jekowsky showed admirable skill in handling dynamic ranges, his rather rigid adherence to mostly faster-than-average tempos prevented opportunities for increasing dramatic impact. This disappointment was not furthered by a horn section that seemed to be having an off night.

The Fourth Symphony, though, was a different matter. The long introduction was taken at the right, leisurely pace, making the subsequent Allegro all the more brisk by contrast. I did miss Jekowsky's not taking the exposition repeat, but the overall quality of performance propelled the music onward. The highlight for me was the fourth movement, where the accuracy of fleet strings lifted spirits. Destruction and amazement were left behind with the Rouse, and the true "Cristobal" sun appeared.

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