

# Hitting the right note

By JULIE JOHNSON  
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BETH SCHLANKER/PRESS DEMOCRAT

Santa Rosa High School students Aidan Collins-Smith, 16, center left, talks with Buddy Burch, 16, center right, in a waiting area before they perform in the Honor Choir with the Santa Rosa Symphony during a performance at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts on Sunday.

After weeks of intense preparation, high school and college choral singers from across Sonoma County gathered at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts over the weekend for a chance to perform an annual program with the Santa Rosa Symphony.

Led by Music Director Bruno Ferrandis, the performances featured a 140-person chorus to sing works by three French composers.

The chance for young singers to work with professionals was hard to beat, a group of Santa Rosa Junior College singers said Sunday during a break from warm-ups for the afternoon performance. The singers admitted they were, well, somewhat star-struck by the world-class director.

“He’s adorably French,” said Jessica Celmer, 21, a senior and member of the SRJC Chamber Singers. “He stomps his feet, he gets so into it.”

“He knows what he wants and how to tell you how to do it,” said Danny Foster, 20, who is in his third semester.

“It’s awesome,” said Andy Bryson, 18, a freshman from Sonoma.

With just a handful of rehearsals “tutti,” or alltogether, the symphony opened Saturday with singers from the Santa Rosa High School Chamber Singers, Montgomery High School Concert Choir, Santa Rosa Junior College Concert Choir and Chamber Singers and the Sonoma Bach Choir. The program concludes with a performance at 8 p.m. Monday at Wells Fargo Center.

Ferrandis, who joined the symphony in 2006, said the annual choir performance engages a wider audience in classical music and challenges musicians of varying skills to work together.

“What's good about it is the least experienced singers must very fast join the level of the professionals,” Ferrandis said before Sunday's matinee.

The singers were prepped to rehearse with the full group by Sonoma Bach Choir Director Robert Worth.

“I love to do it because each demographic brings a different set of assets and skills to the table,” Worth said. “The young singers just have the sound that I'm always trying to get from my Bach singers. The older people know music and how to control their voices.”

Ferrandis said it was a challenge to bring the singers and orchestra together as a group to perform such complicated music.

For example, Gabriel Fauré's “Requiem” opens with a humble chorus in rumbling low tones that require a keen skill, Ferrandis said. He said he whooped, stomped and used “all means” to communicate how to express the “tempo rubato,” or push and pull of the music's pace, or a difficult switch from a G-flat to a G-natural, he said.

“I'm not a placid person,” Ferrandis said. “When I work I use all energy to get what I want. The result yesterday was good, we worked very hard.”

Individual choirs had exhaustive practices to make sure they knew the music. Santa Rosa High senior Buddy Burch, 16, said their choir met every week for weeks and nearly every day from 7 to 10 p.m. the week before the performance.

“It's been a lot of work,” Burch said. “But it's been a fun thing to learn from the older singers, their darkness of tone and control.”

“Bob (Worth) is precise and Bruno (Ferrandis) is dramatic,” said Santa Rosa High Junior Niko Leocoeuche, 16, as he waited in a courtyard for another round of warm-ups to begin. “They're both funny and that helps a lot.”