

REVIEW: Lukewarm Mozart, then hot Mahler at Santa Rosa Symphony concert

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After tossing off a light-hearted, Latin program last month with a guest conductor, the Santa Rosa Symphony welcomed back Music Director Bruno Ferrandis on Saturday night with a serious, Viennese program spanning the farewell symphonies of Mozart and Mahler.

Ironically, the sunny, first half of the program, devoted to three beloved Mozart works, was less satisfying. Both Mozart's Overture to "The Marriage of Figaro" and his Olympian Symphony No. 41, "Jupiter," were a bit rough around the edges, plagued by sloppy entrances and moments of mushy ensemble.

Was this due to lack of rehearsal or low morale, problems with concentration or poor acoustics?

Sometimes the subtle nuances required to play Mozart — the crisp attacks and rhythmic precision, which were all there, in spades — tend to get lost in translation if the acoustics are not up to snuff.

Still, soprano Christine Brandes, who has been battling a cold, was one of the bright spots of the first half, delivering the tormented aria, "Porgi amor," from Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," with a smooth, marbled tone and emotional veracity.

Dressed in a dark blue blouse and velvet skirt, Brandes resembled The Queen of the Night character from Mozart's "The Magic Flute," and her gown served as a visual harbinger of the rich, dark tones in the second half of the program.

After intermission, Brandes and the orchestra launched into an alluring rendition of Alban Berg's "Seven Early Songs," a mostly tonal work that blends the lush harmonies of Romanticism with the ethereal edginess of modernism.

A student of Arnold Schoenberg, Berg emerged as the most popular of the 12-tone composers, and he crafted these intensely emotional songs in the tradition of the great German art songs (lieder).

Each of the songs, based on poems by seven different writers, are beautiful little gems strung together into a glittering necklace. Brandes delivered each one with exquisite expressiveness, illuminating the music's darkly dissonant corners with her spot-on pitch, clear diction and dramatic heft.

Led by Ferrandis, the orchestra accompanied Brandes with sensitive dynamics and a burnished tone, creating a cohesive tapestry of sound from noodling clarinets, clarion trumpets, vibrating violins and singing harps.

The last work on the program, and its *raison d'être* — Ferrandis wanted to mark the 100th anniversary of Gustav Mahler's death in 1911 — was also its high point.

A battalion of musicians converged on stage for Mahler's searing Adagio from Symphony No. 10, the only movement the composer was able to finish before his death.

Leading the troops through the sprawling, 25-minute movement, Ferrandis proved an impassioned interpreter, from the bleak, opening melody in the violas to the terrifying, dissonant climax, which dies away with no real resolution.

Bravo to the orchestra, especially the brass, for pulling off this difficult piece with panache.

Mahler has been called “the last farewell of modern man to the beautiful fading dream of Romanticism.”

Realism may not be the most popular potion for Valentine's Day, but if you're a Mahler lover, you're probably not into Hallmark holidays anyway. This is a rare treat you won't want to miss.

The Santa Rosa Symphony will repeat the performance at 8 p.m. Monday at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts.

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