

Santa Rosa Symphony opens season Italian-style

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The Santa Rosa Symphony under Music Director Bruno Ferrandis took the road less travelled Saturday night at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts, presenting a program of quirky, Italian works highlighted by singing melodies and birdsong.

For the launch of its 83rd season, the symphony drew inspiration from opera and the voice-like virtuosity of the violin, opening with the beloved Overture to Verdi's "The Force of Destiny" and showcasing Russian violinist Dmitri Berlinsky's virtuosic talent in Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1.

Of Paganini's playing, violinist and composer Louis Spohr once commented that he felt "alternately charmed and repelled." The same could be said of this concerto, which was written by the daredevil violinist as a star vehicle for himself.

The longest and most famous of his surviving six concertos, the work boasts mind-blowing pyrotechnics in the first and third movements and a lyrical Adagio, but lacks the emotional depth and satisfying arc of the great concertos by Brahms or Mendelssohn.

Speaking during the pre-concert lecture, Berlinsky talked about his Russian roots - he was born into a musical family in St. Petersburg — and described his intimate relationship with the violin.

"For me, it's the sound of the human voice," he said. "You feel the vibration of the strings, and you find away to project the sound."

Dressed in a flowing black shirt and pants for the performance, Berlinsky stood far back on the stage, enveloped by the first stands, and his 250-year-old violin did not project as well as one might hope.

Also, there was a bit of harsh barking from attacks up high on the E string - probably due to the fact that he had broken that string earlier in the day and had to replace it.

In the first movement, the orchestra had a difficulty accompanying the violinist's fiery double-stops, but soon fell into the rhythmic groove, with help from Ferrandis.

After the madness of the first movement's cadenza, Berlinsky settled down in the Adagio, setting loose his incredibly sweet tone on a string of touching melodies.

But the soloist really shone in the final movement, a rollicking Rondo that calls for Paganini's signature ricochet bowing (where the upper bow bounces of its own accord) and flying staccato (where the bow springs slightly from the string.)

For his consummate performance - in musical terms, the equivalent of a contortionist act, using the small muscle groups - Berlinsky was rewarded with an enthusiastic standing ovation. (If you are aching for an encore, check out his MySpace page to hear Bach's "Largo" and various Tchaikovsky works.)

In the second half of the concert, the emphasis shifted to the orchestra itself, with a work that challenged both the musician's chops and listeners' ears.

"Rendering" for Orchestra consists of tonal sketches from Schubert's unfinished 10th Symphony patched together with atonal music written by contemporary composer Luciano Berio.

To help the audience along, Ferrandis explained that the Berio music is always introduced by the tinkling sound of the celesta. At first, it sounded like the orchestra was tuning up rather than playing the Berio part, but as the piece progressed, the modern patchwork became even more intriguing than the Schubert.

Ottorino Respighi's rousing "Fountains of Rome" brought the concert to a close with a big splash, the soundscape washing over the audience with alternate blasts of brass, twittering woodwinds and the eerie echo of a church bell.

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