

## **Small Hands, Big Heart**

Santa Rosa Symphony – Review May 9, 2011

*Classical Sonoma and San Francisco Classical Voice*

**By Steve Osborn**

Jon Nakamatsu has small hands but a big heart. That anatomic mismatch was abundantly evident during his appearance with the Santa Rosa Symphony on Saturday, which featured a swoon-inducing rendition of Tchaikovsky's canonic First Piano Concerto. From the familiar opening to the thrilling conclusion, the petite Nakamatsu held the audience in thrall, as much by his prodigious technique as by his elegant phrasing.

He began lightly, playing the opening chords with little sustain and zero bombast. His persistent use of staccato drew attention to the notes rather than the pedal and signaled that his performance would focus more on delicacy than excess. His posture reflected this approach: He sat ramrod straight, without undue swaying, and his hands were always at the keyboard, only rising in the air occasionally to punctuate the ends of phrases.

As the movement progressed, Nakamatsu began to lighten up. His use of the pedal increased, and his many runs up and down the keys swelled in velocity and expressivity. By the cadenza, he had reached full stride. Here his impeccable technique shone through, with every note sounding and every phrase etched to perfection. What was most impressive, however, were his judicious pauses between lines. Even the rests were melodic.

In the background, Music Director Bruno Ferrandis and the Symphony players kept pace with Nakamatsu's brisk tempos and added many flourishes of their own. Romantic piano concertos have often been characterized as piano vs. orchestra, but such was not the case here. The players faded and came to the fore as needed, often seeming to inspire Nakamatsu to more expressive heights.

The opening movement ended with hearty applause, a neglected tradition that appears to be reviving. Opening movements of concertos are really works unto themselves, usually containing virtuosic cadenzas, and there's no reason not to applaud them. Virtually everyone in the nearly full Wells Fargo Center seemed to agree.

After the audience settled down, Nakamatsu embarked on the tender *Andantino semplice* of the second movement, again displaying his exquisite phrasing and musical empathy. Just when the atmosphere was at its most languorous, he launched into an amazingly fast *Prestissimo*, showcasing his well-oiled fingers and their astonishing ability to sustain a trill of any length with the utmost precision.

The last movement of the Tchaikovsky showcases the soloist and orchestra in turn, with many alternating passages. On each reentry, Nakamatsu turned his engagement up a notch, at one point pausing to mop his otherwise unperturbed brow. The standing ovation at the end was immediate and unanimous. I cannot remember a better soloist playing with the Symphony in recent years.

The Symphony itself was also in top form. The ever-changing personnel in the string sections played remarkably well, and the more familiar woodwind, brass, and percussion players were uniformly excellent.

### Remembering Friends

The concert began with a last-minute addition: the “Nimrod” variation from Elgar’s Enigma Variations, played to commemorate the recent deaths of two prominent local businessmen, Evert Person and Jess Jackson. This was followed in short order by Sofia Gubaidulina’s Fairytale Poem, a brief work from 1971 that displays her firm command of orchestration, but without the intense expressivity of her later works.

Gubaidulina composed many film scores during the Soviet period, and Fairytale Poem could easily accompany a movie, though it would likely be more a film noir than a fairy tale. The emphasis is on eerie, isolated sounds, with many brief solos giving way to a jazzy section in 6/8 time. The texture is delicate, often sounding like chamber music, and the major emphasis is on atmosphere rather than narrative.

Like many concert-opening contemporary works, Fairytale Poem ended way too soon. Perhaps Ferrandis will see fit to program a longer work by Gubaidulina in the future. She is an important composer, and her many compositions deserve a wider audience.

The all-Russian main program concluded in the second half with a stirring performance of Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition. Actually, calling the work “Russian” is somewhat misleading, since it owes as much to Ravel’s decidedly French orchestration as to Mussorgsky’s original piano score. The entire piece, in fact, is a tangle of original and copy. Are we hearing Mussorgsky, Ravel, or Victor Hartman, whose paintings had inspired the work?

The answer may be “all three” — along with the musicians and conductor who perform, in this case bringing the pictures to life. Beginning with a strong entry from the brass section, the Symphony displayed its many talents, including some memorable tuba playing, a haunting saxophone solo, and consistently energetic percussion. Ferrandis was in full control, executing sharp cutoffs and setting brisk tempos.

Everything worked. By the final picture, “The Great Gate of Kiev,” the Symphony was in full tilt, with the cymbals crashing and everyone else playing to the max. It made for a rousing finale for the Symphony’s penultimate season in the Wells Fargo Center. Thanks to a recent infusion of much-needed cash, they move to the resplendent Green Music Center in 2012.

*Steve Osborn, a medical writer and editor by day, moonlights as a violist, singer, and music critic.*