

Darby Hinshaw to play the giddy side of Mozart with Santa Rosa Symphony

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When Darby Hinshaw performs the Mozart Horn Concerto No. 2 this weekend with the Santa Rosa Symphony, he will be channeling the giddier side of the composer.

“It’s dangerous, in interpreting these pieces, to approach them as really serious music,” the 32-year-old musician said in a phone interview from his San Diego home. “This isn’t Mozart, the genius. This is Mozart the goofball we see in the film, ‘Amadeus.’”

The composer wrote his four-horn concertos for fellow Austrian Joseph Leutgeb, poking fun at his friend in the dedication to No. 2: “Wolfgang Amadé Mozart took pity on Leutgeb, donkey, ox and simpleton, at Vienna 27 May 1783.”

In Mozart’s time, players performed on a “natural horn” with no valves, hand-stopping the bell in order to squeeze out all of the notes. That awkward method must have tickled Mozart’s funny bone, prompting him to write music rife with insider humor.

“In the last movement ... the melodic part in the middle is incredibly awkward and doesn’t fit well,” Hinshaw said. “The solo part is full of these little tricks and traps for the player of this primitive equipment.”

This weekend, Hinshaw will perform the concerto on a modern horn with valves, invented by Henrich Stolzel around 1814 and commonly known as a French horn.

“When we play the same music on the modern double-valve horn, it’s almost like we’ve achieved a victory over Mozart’s jibes,” Hinshaw said. “It is vastly, far-and-away easier.”

But while the technical challenges are reduced, the Mozart concerto still provides a considerable interpretive challenge.

“The difficulty for us is playing it in a way that is Mozart,” Hinshaw said. “The valve instrument is much bigger and heavier than Mozart’s horn, so we have to find an approach of tone, color and phrasing that works.”

During this weekend’s concerts, Mozart’s Horn Concerto No. 2 will serve as a foil for Tchaikovsky’s tragic and triumphant Symphony No. 5, led by Maestro Bruno Ferrandis during the second half of the concert.

The Tchaikovsky symphony boasts the most popular slow movement in the symphonic repertoire and opens with a beautiful melody, played hauntingly on the horn.

Although Hinshaw is on hiatus from the Santa Rosa Symphony — he performs full-time with the San Diego Symphony — he has consented to play the Tchaikovsky with the orchestra.

That's a very unusual offer from a soloist, but Hinshaw could not resist the challenge.

"I like to take risks musically and take risks in performances," he said. "At the highest levels of music-making, you have to live dangerously ... safe playing is predictable and boring."

Most horn players can relate to the dark humor of Mozart. After all, their instrument holds the Guinness World Record title as the most difficult in the orchestra to play.

"We always joke that the physicists don't really understand what we do and how it works," Hinshaw said. "Science cannot fully explain this particular instrument."

The modern horn is an over-glorified version of an ancient hunting instrument, originally made from animal horns and used for communication.

"It found its way into civilized music-making a lot slower than most instruments," Hinshaw said. "The horn was not used in a church setting until the 1700s."

It is the third highest-sounding instrument in the brass family but has the widest range: about five octaves, depending on the player's skill.

To produce this range, the player has to execute what amounts to a high-wire act: press the valves, tense the lips, raise the soft palette, position the tongue, lower the larynx, blow air into the mouthpiece, and place a hand in the bell.

"We're typically the nerds of the brass section," Hinshaw said. "That goes along with being the most technically difficult instrument."

Like a violinist, the horn player must aim for the right pitch with their ears as well as their embouchure (lip shape). Only it's a lot harder to make a nice sound, and mistakes are a lot more embarrassing.

"The horn has an ability to make awful noises," Hinshaw said. "It's really just a big, primitive bullhorn."

A native of San Francisco, Hinshaw started out on the flute in elementary school, and switched over to the horn in junior high.

He attended San Francisco's School of the Arts, a public high school for gifted artists, then received his bachelor of music from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

After juggling up to eight orchestra gigs in the Bay Area for years — including the Santa Rosa Symphony for the past four years — Hinshaw is delighted to have exited from the “Freeway Philharmonic” and arrived at a full-time job.

In San Diego, he lives a pretty routine life, getting all the adrenalin he needs onstage.

“Musicians are always looking for that transcendent performance, where all the technical considerations just fall away,” he said. “I think living somewhat dangerously is part of the beauty and the joy of live performances.”

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