

Review: Santa Rosa Symphony opens season on strong note

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Saturday night's season-opening concert by the Santa Rosa Symphony led by Music Director Bruno Ferrandis revolved around the steely rhythms, mordant wit and brilliant colors of Russian opera, ballet and symphonic music.

Energy was the keynote of the concert launching the symphony's 30th and final season in the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts. Next fall, the ensemble will open its 85th season in the Green Music Center's world-class Weill Hall at Sonoma State University.

In his opening remarks, Santa Rosa Symphony Executive Director Alan Silow also revealed another piece of good news: After discounting subscriptions for first-time subscribers, the symphony signed up 3,700 full-season subscribers, "the most in our history."

Along with the new faces in the audience, Silow welcomed four new members of the orchestra, most in key positions: Associate Concertmaster Jay Zhong, Principal Violist Elizabeth Prior, Principal Cellist Adelle-Akiko Kearns and Percussionist Stan Muncy.

Although the new faces lent excitement to opening night, the buzz came from a more familiar face: Russian-born pianist Natasha Paremski, returning after two appearances with the symphony in 2005 to perform Prokofiev's mesmerizing Piano Concerto No. 3 before intermission.

Already a seasoned performer at age 24, Paremski swept onstage in unconventional garb: a green-and-black plaid dress with a short, flared skirt, black stockings and stiletto heels.

But fashion details were forgotten once the poised pianist sat down at the piano and proceeded to breeze through one of the most challenging piano concertos of the 20th century. Like a true pro, she made it look easy.

Throughout the concerto, which opens slowly but quickly gains steam, Ferrandis glanced over his shoulder frequently, providing the glue to keep the orchestra and soloist together.

The first movement's whirling-dervish scales and arpeggios were all perfectly phrased and shaped by Paremski. But even more impressive was the spell she cast during the variations of the second movement, when Paremski would leave rapid-fire rhythms behind to spin out a delicate web of music-box tinkling, lulling listeners nearly to sleep.

The third-movement finale built up into a thrilling wash of sound, with the orchestra nearly obliterating the soloist. Paremski received a well-deserved standing ovation from the crowd, who lined up during intermission for signed copies of her debut recital CD.

The concert opened with another Prokofiev piece, the Suite from “The Love for Three Oranges,” based on his 1919 opera.

Both romantic and grotesque, this athletic curtain-opener settled nicely into a rock-steady rhythmic groove, highlighted by shimmering strings and burnished brass. Principal violist Elizabeth Prior delivered a haunting solo.

The concert concluded with Igor Stravinsky's “Petrouchka,” a risky ballet score that tested everyone's mettle, from woodwinds and brass to percussion, harp, celesta and piano.

The orchestra came through this musical maze with flying colors, balancing the buzzing energy and executing the off-kilter rhythms with aplomb. The one disappointment was that the cellos did not project very well.

If the orchestra continues to play like they did Saturday night, there's no doubt they will be ready for their new home.

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

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