



California Dreaming II

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Up in California's Sonoma County this past weekend, there was a lot to see and hear during the Green Music Center's festive opening weekend. Concerts on September 29 and 30 on the campus of Sonoma State University—by the Santa Rosa Symphony, an assortment of choral groups, pianist Lang Lang, and the country/bluegrass band Alison Krauss and Union Station—were preceded by a flurry of behind-the-scenes preparations.

Final Friday-night rehearsals by the Santa Rosa Symphony reportedly lasted until 11 p.m., as acoustics were fine-tuned. Technical tweaks to the concert Steinway by pianist Lang Lang continued throughout Saturday afternoon, just a few hours before curtain time. Lang Lang's Saturday-night concert at the 1,400-seat Joan and Sanford I. Weill Concert Hall was attended by California Governor Jerry Brown. Sold-out events created long lines of cars snaking down Rohnert Park Expressway, the center's main entrance road, and some concertgoers even walked down the expressway on foot. Crowds with free lawn tickets came prepared with coats and blankets for 50-degree temperatures on Saturday evening, and parasols and hats for 94-degree daytime heat on Sunday. In pre-concert remarks on Saturday night, an effusive Ruben Armijañana, president of Sonoma State University, proclaimed the weekend to be the most momentous for this part of California since 1937, the year the Golden Gate Bridge was completed, and Sanford Weill—for whom the concert hall is named, along with his wife, Joan—pointed out the auspicious harvest moon. As [previewed](#)

at [SymphonyNOW](#) last week, this weekend was one long awaited by many, not least of whom is the Santa Rosa Symphony, now Weill Hall's resident orchestra.

The hall itself is all blond and burgundy, with lots of windows, giving it somewhat the look, as one concertgoer commented, of "winery." It also has a bit of a church-like feeling, with its row after row of wooden seats. Unlike church pews, however, these specially designed seats are cushioned and comfortable, with one surprising feature: they make a thunderous noise when 1,400 people sit down in unison, as after a standing ovation. The sound of music from the stage seems clear and warm, neither dry nor too mushy, and fairly equal from different parts of the hall. The back "barn door" of the hall is opened for some concerts, including all of those this weekend, and the lawn is quite a nice spot to listen from, with two large video screens on the left and right sides of the stage. As will sometimes happen here, though, in early fall, it can be very hot in the day or quite cool at night.

As for the concerts themselves, for an Easterner there was something special about hearing the open fifths in Copland's *Canticle of Freedom*—performed on the Santa Rosa Symphony's debut program on Sunday—while gazing out windows facing the stark hillside off to the right. One musical moment that sticks in memory is the rhythmically disciplined, intense Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, with the orchestra's former music director, Jeffrey Kahane, at the piano, and current music director, Bruno Ferrandis, on the podium. The wide-ranging program also included a world premiere, *Sonoma Overture*, by Nolan Gasser, a local resident. Gasser's work used different instruments to pay homage to the region—low brass and winds to evoke dairy pastures and wildlife, for example, or soprano sax, violins, and French horns for vineyards. For his solo recital Saturday night, Lang Lang opened the hall with three Mozart sonatas and all four Chopin ballades—a program he announced he had not played before. The pianist is known for fingers that can do anything and an occasional habit of conducting himself via left-hand curlicues in the air. The crowd ate it up, especially in the Chopin. As he exited the stage, he gave high-fives and bear hugs to Sanford Weill, who has known the performer since his teenage days.

On Sunday night, there were whoops and whistles from the large crowd attending the Alison Krauss & Union Station concert. The evening featured the band's virtuosic style of bluegrass/country, with tight vocal harmonies and impressive solos on guitar, dobro, banjo, mandolin, violin, and double bass. Their one long set was in fact the band's final performance of a tour that has lasted two years, and the onstage banter was a bit like an extended family preparing to say farewell after a holiday visit. At the end, instead of a single encore or perhaps two, the band performed a handful of short songs, standing in a semicircle around a single microphone, in hushed, reverential tones that seemed just right for a crowd of people clearly very happy to have the band—and the new hall—in its midst.