

## SR SYMPHONY REVS UP SEASON WITH POWERFUL OPENER

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For the Santa Rosa Symphony's first-ever subscription concert in the Green Music Center Oct. 6, Bruno Ferrandis chose three works with the potential to show off the center's vaunted acoustics. All three--Mozart's overture to "The Magic Flute," Mahler's first symphony, and a world premiere by composer-in-residence Edmund Campion--feature brass and percussion, along with a dynamic range that starts below pianissimo and builds to triple forte.

By and large, the acoustics matched the promise. The Mahler in particular evolved into a tremendous sonic display, and the Mozart was not far behind. The exception was the new piece, "The Last Internal Combustion Engine," in which the manifold orchestral exertions managed to drown out the amplified soloists, the cutting-edge Kronos String Quartet. Or at least that's how it sounded from my seat in the Choral Circle behind the stage.

"Combustion," as the piece may some day be known, combines electronic and acoustic instruments in an uneasy mixture that gives hints of the combustible without fully igniting. The first indication of the clash of old and new was on the stage itself, where a tangle of wires hung from the otherwise traditional semicircle of chairs for the soloists. Some of these wires connected to headphones that the first and second violinists donned upon entering the stage. Others presumably linked to a computer and keyboard manned by the orchestra's pianist, Kymry Esainko, back in the percussion section.

The piece began with the quiet sound of wood blocks tapped in an insistent rhythm. After a brief electronic flurry, the strings got into the act, with the players hitting their strings with the backs of their bows, an ancient technique known as "col legno." Other instruments gradually joined in, but the emphasis throughout was on forward-moving percussive sounds, with Mr. Ferrandis giving a strong cut-time beat: one and two and one and two. Given the title and the obvious sonic comparisons to an engine, the effect was of a car surging down a lonely highway late at night, its headlights illuminating an eerie landscape.

At some point the Kronos entered the fray, but they were hard to hear above the roaring engine, despite their amplification. They finally came to the fore in a quieter section, but by then they seemed like an afterthought. It was hard to know where they fit into the scheme. Were they parts of the engine or simply passengers?

The concluding moments were the most memorable, as the various sections of the orchestra stopped playing their instruments and began waving toy cars in the air. After a while, the only sound to be heard was the spinning of little wheels, propelled not by combustion but rather by hand.

Gustav Mahler was born too long ago (1860) to play with toy cars as a child, but his first symphony, also known as "The Titan," contains many child-like melodies in its evocations of landscape and village life. The most obvious occur in the second movement, with its peasant dance, and the third, with its famous minor-key rendition of "Frere Jacques." The symphony itself, however, grows far beyond the child-like, combining those melodies with far more adult ones to create one of the great masterpieces of the repertoire.

Playing "The Titan" is a daunting prospect, but Ferrandis and Co. were mostly up to the task. The hushed beginning with its seven octaves of A demonstrated that the Green can handle quietude as well as amplitude. The offstage trumpets were effective, and the long crescendo was well controlled. Mr. Ferrandis' tempo, however, was a bit slow, and the many French horns (eight by my count) were sometimes uneven.

Similar problems plagued the second movement. The tempo was again too deliberate, and now it was the trumpets' turn to sound ragged. But the cellos, who begin the movement with a lively dance step, sounded terrific. The ubiquitous wood in the hall really seems to resonate with the lower strings, a situation that will undoubtedly improve as the auditorium wood ages and hardens.

The third movement began with an excellent bass solo, followed by the various melodic snippets that evoke both the funereal and the playful. Uniting all these disparate strands is hard work, but the orchestra met the challenge and carried their success forward into the riveting final movement. The playing here was truly moving, particularly from the strings, who played with spot-on intonation and deep expressivity. As the movement roared towards its conclusion, the clarinets leaned back in their chairs, projecting their instruments skyward. The French horns soon followed suit, standing up to deliver the final triumphant melody, this time in perfect coordination. The sustained applause for both orchestra and conductor was well deserved.

The concert, which concluded with "The Titan," began with another bit of magic, the overture to "The Magic Flute." Here the horns rang out at the beginning with a full-bodied, tangible sound that set the stage for the rest of the concert. The string entry, by contrast, was delicate and well controlled. Mr. Ferrandis conducted the overture with restraint, his hands rarely venturing above shoulder height. As with the Mahler, the tempo was deliberate, but the unanimity of the playing compensated for the lack of speed.