

SR SYMPHONY TRIUMPHS IN FIRST INNING AT GREEN MUSIC CENTER

by [Steve Osborn](#)

Classical Sonoma

Review of performance: Sunday, September 30, 2012

Before the Santa Rosa Symphony's inaugural concert in the new Green Music Center on Sept. 30, the audience was warned that there would be lots of opportunities for applause, but that didn't stop them from delivering repeated ovations throughout the blazing Indian Summer afternoon. The first came before a note had been played, when Don Green was introduced. Without him there would be no Green Music Center, and the full house rose applauding to acknowledge his presence at the back of the hall.

As Santa Rosa Symphony Executive Director Alan Silow noted in his opening remarks, one word captures the essence of the music center: wow. "It's a 10 on the wow Richter scale," he exulted, gesturing to the magnificent architectural surroundings, which were at their absolute prime in the glowing autumnal sun. Light streamed in through all the windows, and fresh air through the wide-open back wall, beyond which stretched a sun-drenched crowd that seemed as large as the one inside.

Mr. Silow expressed the hope that, thanks to the music center, Sonoma County would become as well known for the quality of its culture as for the quality of its wine. With that aspiration still hanging in the air, conductor emeritus Corrick Brown strode upon the stage and bid the orchestra and chorus to rise for a spirited rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner. The anthem began with a drum roll at the back of the hall, followed by thunderous playing and singing from the stage. When it was over, nobody shouted, "Play ball," but the effect was nonetheless the same. The audience was ready for action.

First up to bat was Mr. Brown himself, who stayed on stage to conduct Beethoven's "Consecration of the House" overture, an almost obligatory opening piece for new concert halls. Brown, who is in his 80s, shows no sign of slowing down, and he conducted the overture with panache, even eschewing the customary baton. The tempo was stately, the musical lines distinctive, the crescendos effective, and the balance excellent. The basses were particularly resonant, their low notes seeming to meld with all the surrounding wood.

After the applause subsided, the stagehands wheeled out a Steinway concert grand perilously close to the edge of the stage. The instrument's player arrived a few minutes later, in the person of conductor laureate Jeffrey Kahane, followed by the symphony's current conductor, Bruno Ferrandis. Both men were warmly greeted--another standing ovation--and then took their respective at-bats with Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4.

Mr. Kahane eased into the concerto's distinctive opening with real feeling, bringing out each note to the full. Moments later the orchestra matched his subtlety with a remarkably smooth entry. The back-and-forth between the pianist and the orchestra built in intensity throughout the movement, with both moving irresistibly forward. The acoustics in the

hall seem especially well suited for piano sound. Every note is clear, even in the most dense runs, and the dynamic contrast between pianissimos and fortissimos is palpable.

Mr. Kahane used these acoustic advantages to the max. One trill in particular started off as a roaring lion but rapidly morphed into a purring kitten. The artist himself was a study in metamorphosis, often leaning back and staring up as if receiving energy from above, then suddenly plunging forward into the keyboard. At other times, he shook his head, arched his eyebrows and closed his eyes. His playing in the cadenza was exceptionally memorable, and the transition back to the orchestra was exquisite.

The brief second movement was as ethereal as it gets, compounded by the remarkable quietude of the hall itself. No one dropped the proverbial pin, but there was a distant airplane flying by. The concluding Rondo began at a rapid pace, showcasing Mr. Kahane's furious energy and bravura runs up and down the keyboard. A syncopated section with the violas was distinctly effective, with piano and strings meshing tightly despite their rhythmic divergence.

The tempestuous ending brought an equally tempestuous ovation, the third of the day--but who's counting? The applause, however, was soon replaced by a smattering of complaints when people on the east side of the hall realized they had few alternatives other than long lines for reaching the main lobby on the west side. For all its magnificence, the music center might benefit from a couple sessions with a foot-traffic engineer.

The second half began with another overture, this one the world premiere of the "Sonoma Overture" by Petaluma composer Nolan Gasser. The work began with rapid quintuplets and other short phrases in the strings. The effect was one of murmuring yet rapid motion. The sound became more distinctive with the addition of a marimba, but pretty soon everyone got into the act, and the piece transmuted into a fanfare evoking the local scenery. It was pleasurable but not quite indelible.

Far more consequential was the next offering, the rarely performed "Canticle of Freedom," for orchestra and chorus, by Aaron Copland. Originally composed for the opening of Kresge Auditorium at MIT in 1955, the canticle is classic Copland with wide-open chords and broad harmonies. The beginning is enchanting. The themes open out gradually, interspersed with hunting calls, and a tense expectancy hovers in the air. Mr. Ferrandis was clearly in his element, using restrained clocklike motions to usher in each new musical line as the music continued to build to a shattering climax punctuated by a resonant gong.

After a trumpet solo, the choir entered with the words of the medieval Scottish poet John Barbour: "Freedom is a noble thing!" Every word was distinct, and the choral sound was full and rich. With around 100 singers drawn from the Sonoma Bach Choir and various student choruses, the assembled multitude could make itself heard above the orchestra, although the balance was sometimes tenuous. The key phrase, however, rang out with consistency. Freedom is indeed a noble thing.

Just as Beethoven's "Consecration of the House" is almost de rigeur for inaugurating concert halls, so too is Ravel's "Bolero" for showing off all the orchestra's various sections, starting with the percussion, spreading to the woodwinds, sweeping up the strings, and culminating with the brass. It's a no-longer-young person's guide to the orchestra, easily distinguished from Benjamin Britten's orchestral guide for young people by its underlying eroticism.

The playing in this instance was exemplary. The snare drum never varied from its incessant rhythmic figure, and the pizzicatos were pointedly perfect. Each woodwind and brass solo was better than the last, culminating in a stupendous trombone riff. Toward the end all one could do was to sit back and luxuriate in the veritable cloud of orchestral sound. As before, Mr. Ferrandis was in complete control, ushering the orchestra step by step from the opening pianissimo to the final thunderclap. Yet another standing ovation.

Moments later, the audience got a chance to use its hands in a more musical fashion, clapping along with the Radetzky March, a favorite encore by Johann Strauss the elder. They clearly enjoyed Mr. Ferrandis's exhortations to clap loudly or softly, as befitting the music, and everyone got an idea of what it's like to make music together. It's a noble thing.

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