

MUSIC REVIEW

Santa Rosa Symphony review: a new era

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After all the celebrations, speeches and starry headliners that attended last month's opening of Weill Hall at Sonoma State University's Green Music Center, it was time to get down to business. The Santa Rosa Symphony, which will make its home in the new concert hall, began its 85th season over the weekend with an exciting world premiere and some more workaday standard fare.

On Monday night, under Music Director Bruno Ferrandis, the orchestra displayed plenty of vigor and zest, as well as a robust and full-bodied sound that carries beautifully through the hall's resonant acoustics. But the new setting was also less than forgiving about lapses in ensemble and intonation; technically speaking, the bar for this orchestra is now that much higher.

Happily, those considerations didn't impinge on the unveiling of "The Last Internal Combustion Engine," a vivid and richly imagined concerto by Berkeley composer Edmund Campion, who serves as the orchestra's composer in residence. Scored for a combination of amplified string quartet - specifically, the Kronos Quartet - electronics and orchestra, the piece emerged as both a celebration and an elegy for a particular vein of 20th century technology.

In the opening sections, Campion draws on those musical odes to heavy machinery that proliferated in the early modernist era, as well as the rough-hewn orchestral onslaught of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." The key difference is the presence of an electronic layer, provided by real-time manipulation by a laptop computer, adding a vein of high-tech clicking and thrumming that is worlds away from the old foundries and skyscrapers. And Campion's sonic inventiveness gets more pronounced as the piece goes on, spanning three unbroken sections lasting about 20 minutes. The middle section adds a wistful note, as the sound of machinery periodically parts to reveal glimpses of a more pristine world - first a brass band, then a string rhapsody, each one calculated to be simultaneously beautiful and slightly cloying.

If there's a miscalculation here, it's the fact that the quartet is underused - for most of the piece's duration, the group's sound is simply folded into that of the orchestra (Campion dubs the score a concerto grosso, which seems to acknowledge as much).

But in the score's eerie, keening final pages, the quartet comes to the fore at last, joined by a moody trumpet solo and unearthly woodwind sounds. The piece concludes with a breathtaking, and heartbreaking, surprise.

Ferrandis led the orchestra with forceful assurance, shaping the sonic landscape superbly and bringing out the music's rhythmic directness. Mozart's "Magic Flute" Overture began the evening in a reading that attempted a similar propulsiveness but didn't always boast the requisite technical clarity.

After intermission came Mahler's First Symphony, in a performance that struggled through the early movements - Ferrandis' tempos were often laggardly, especially in the squishy second movement - only to turn around in a blaze of glory for a vibrant and superbly dynamic finale.

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