

Review: Santa Rosa Symphony's spicy show

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By Diane Peterson

The Santa Rosa Symphony heated up its kitchen Saturday night at the Green Music Center in Rohnert Park, serving up a multicultural smorgasbord of spicy rhythms and bold, brassy flavors.

Music Conductor Bruno Ferrandis came up with the menu of pulsating dance music as a contrast to the two moody works chosen by cellist Maya Beiser: “Mariel” by Argentinean composer Osvaldo Golijov and “Kol Nidrei” by Max Bruch.

The program of five, shorter works could easily have slipped into a confusing, mix-and-match buffet, or worse yet, an easy listening extravaganza.

Yet that never happened, thanks to the complex nature of the pieces opening and ending the concert: George Gershwin's Cuban Overture and Catfish Row and Argentinian composer Alberto Ginastera's “Estancia.”

Based on popular folk and jazz idioms, these works allowed the orchestra to flaunt their versatility as they tossed off jaunty rhythms and racy phrasing.

Bobbing and swaying, Ferrandis appeared quite relaxed with the music, playing up the jazz inflections with a dash of wit.

The best was saved for last: Catfish Row, a symphonic suite from Gershwin's “Porgy and Bess,” regarded as the best American opera ever written.

The five-movement suite is not simply a medley but a serious work in itself, following the opera's dramatic arc while weaving a tapestry from four of its songs.

In place of vocalists, the work offers interesting solos for piano, cello, violin, trumpet, horn, trombone and banjo — all executed expertly by the principal players.

Gershwin's kitschy “Cuban Overture” opened the concert with an ear-popping array of Latin percussion, getting everyone in the groove.

Then, Ginastera's “Estancia” swept listeners off to the rustic ranches of the Pampas grasslands of Argentina.

The dances of this ballet suite require a kind of rough, unrefined playing far removed from Mozart. With minor exceptions, the orchestra delivered, and the audience responded with a roar of approval.

Wearing a black, sequined dress and black, stiletto boots, Beiser carried her 1716 Stradivarius cello onstage before intermission, then plugged it in to perform Golijov's “Mariel” for Cello and Orchestra.

Golijov composed “Mariel” for Cello and Marimba in 1999, then introduced the orchestral version in 2007.

On Saturday, Beiser's subtle playing was often difficult to hear during the eerie opening of “Mariel,” but the sound improved as the piece progressed.

In Bruch's “Kol Nidrei,” the cellist brought out the two, poignant themes of the piece, making the cello sing like a Jewish cantor by sliding up into the notes.

But in the end, it was the orchestra's daring, rhythmic playing that left the most memorable impression.

The concert will be repeated at 8 p.m. Monday at the Green Music Center's Weill Hall, located on the Sonoma State University campus.

(You can reach Staff Writer Diane Peterson at 521-5287 or diane.peterson@pressdemocrat.com.)