

Pianist sparkles in closing concert of Santa Rosa Symphony

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The Santa Rosa Symphony under Music Director Bruno Ferrandis completed its 86th season Saturday night with a provocative paean to spring that pushed the sound thresholds of Weill Hall's sensitive acoustics.

The program, which drew a nearly full house, was tilted toward the piano. All three of the program's composers -- Debussy, Rachmaninoff and Stravinsky -- played piano. And it was a pianist who provided the evening's high point.

Before intermission, Canadian musician Jon Kimura Parker tackled Sergei Rachmaninoff's popular "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini" with ear-tingling panache and power.

Parker, who first met Ferrandis while both were studying at The Juilliard School, is a familiar face to symphony subscribers. He was a regular soloist with the orchestra under its conductor laureate, pianist Jeffrey Kahane, who was in attendance on Saturday night.

When Kimura last performed with the symphony in May 2005, he scaled the heights of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3. This time around, his virtuosity was no less impressive in Rachmaninoff's "Rhapsody," a one-movement piano concerto written in 1934.

The work pays tribute to Niccolò Paganini's diabolically difficult "24 Caprices for Solo Violin (1805)." The set of 24 variations melds classical structure with romantic lyricism, creating an ideal marriage.

Wearing a black shirt and jacket, Parker hunkered down over the keyboard with fierce concentration, tackling the non-stop notes, delicate trills and swinging rhythms with equal parts clarity, elegance and power.

As the piece progressed, Parker's face grew crimson with physical exertion. At the end, however, the good-natured pianist landed on his feet, putting his arms out like an umpire signalling a runner safe.

(Fans of Parker will be happy to hear the pianist will return to Weill Hall next spring in an unusual collaboration with rock 'n' roller Stewart Copeland, former drummer of The Police.)

Culminating the concert was Igor Stravinsky's "Le Sacre du printemps," a sonic tour de force that completes the orchestra's recent cycle of three great Stravinsky ballets. They performed "The Firebird Suite" in 2008 and "Petrushka" in 2011.

Talk about rock 'n' roll. There's nothing shy or retiring about "The Rite of Spring," the premiere of which in Paris incited one of the most famous riots in musical history in 1913.

The piece calls for an army of woodwinds, brass and percussion and invokes the primitive mystery of a mythical, pagan festival. By the end, the music's meter changes so much that it seems that time itself has been obliterated. Still, the players hardly missed a beat.

From dissonant brass and ear-splitting timpani to swirling strings and syncopated woodwinds, the orchestra played as if possessed, pushing dynamics to the threshold.

Also underscoring spring's playful and primitive roots, Claude Debussy's little-known Symphonic Suite for Orchestra, "Printemps," opened the concert with a lush, impressionistic soundscape that flitted, bird-like, from quiet mystery to bombastic fury..

The Santa Rosa Symphony will repeat the Saturday program at 8 p.m. Monday at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts, 50 Mark West Springs Rd., Santa Rosa. Tickets: \$26-47. Phone: 546-8742.

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