

GOING NORTH FOR HIGH-QUALITY SOUNDS

Weill Hall, Santa Rosa Symphony and a World Premiere

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ROHNERT PARK, CA---Prompted to nominate the best combination of performing hall with orchestra in Northern California, these days I'd vote for the new Weill Hall with the Santa Rosa Symphony performing inside.

Going one better, I'd opt for sitting in the peanut gallery: balcony center, traditionally with considerably lower pricing. The acoustics up there are luxurious, blending and mixing the sound and seemingly enhancing it. In addition, the sonic spectrum so often weak in other halls---bass notes, and the contrabass section---come through loud and clear. If there's a weakness, it's the upstage instruments (mostly brass and percussion) that are heard strongest. But that's easily adjusted by any conductor who recalls Richard Strauss' advice from the podium: "Never look encouragingly at the brass section!"

The weekend's concerts (March 22-24) also showed an orchestra with first-rate soloists at the first-chair positions, whether you talk about clarinet, trombone, flute, harp or concertmaster (violin). And Music Director Bruno Ferrandis with his exacting baton (and attention to giving musicians' cues) held it together as the orchestra went at an ambitious Middle Eastern/Russian program; I'd love to hear him do an all-Stravinsky program some day.

In the popular tone poem "Scheherazade" by Rimsky-Korsakov, notable solos were contributed by clarinetist Roy Zajac, harpist Randall Pratt, 2nd trombone Amy Bowers and associate concertmaster Jay Zhong. Zhong in particular could make his violin project strongly and soulfully from the lip of the stage, where others sometimes founder. The Tales of 1,001 Nights unfolded with pictorial relief and variety through princesses, Sinbad, seascapes and the mighty swells of the ocean recounted by the fetching Arabian story-teller Scheherazade. The master colorist Rimsky showed off his voluptuous orchestration skills in generous fashion.

Finding equal resonance was the 11-minute excerpt from Borodin's "Polovtsian Dances," with the intoxicating, ecstatic revelry from an incomplete opera that occupied the composer over his last two decades. Even though the choral segment was omitted, the percussionists seven strong had a field day, and Broadway fans could smile on hearing the ballad "Stranger in Paradise" in its original setting.

Center-piece of the concert was the world premiere of the Viola Concerto of the Iranian-born New Yorker Behzad Ranjbaran, 58, who not only attended but also chatted with patrons during intermission. Ranjbaran calls the viola the instrument of "wisdom, moderation and prudence," but he reaches far beyond. Yes, the viola does enter lyric ruminations and conjure up scenes suggesting mist-enshrouded forests. But it also goes into fiery flights and technically fierce passages, with double stops and rapid runs, as it plays almost nonstop through the 24 minutes and three movements of this tonal work, often with subtle orchestral undercurrents that I found original and arresting. Entering into prominent dialogue with the viola are flute, harp, the woodwind section and muted trumpets.

Like many world premieres, here you were most aware of musicians simply getting the notes down and out, and getting through it with jugged jaw; by the 3rd or 4th time, results usually begin to breathe much better.

The soloist was the veteran principal of the London Symphony, Paul Silverthorne, playing a rare 1620 Amati instrument. Where some other violas growl, this one is lyrical, though with a delicate sound that Silverthorne coaxed forth. He articulated it effectively enough, even in the rapid passage work and speedy double-stops. After the boisterous finale with its perpetual-motion effects, you wanted to say, what a huge assignment, what a technical challenge.

Here the English violist joined select company: Ranjbaran had earlier written concertos for Joshua Bell and Jean-Yves Thibaudet

MUSIC NOTES---The extraordinary sound achieved here in Sonoma County led to queries about where this area some 50 mi. north of San Francisco gets its quality players. One musician laughed and answered, "About 80 percent of our personnel are from the Bay Area," referring to a heterogeneous group affectionately known as the Freeway Philharmonic: Players commuting to several NorCal orchestras each season in order to stitch together a living wage.

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Paul Hertelendy has been covering the dance and modern-music scene in the San Francisco Bay Area with relish -- and a certain amount of salsa -- for years. These critiques appearing weekly (or sometimes semi-weekly, but never weakly) will focus on dance and new musical creativity in performance, with forays into books (by authors of the region), theater and recordings by local artists as well.

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