

SAN BERNARDINO: Orchestra spreads abundant holiday joy

Music performed at Christmas concert included selections from "Home Alone," Handel.



SLIDE SHOW:

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[15 Photos »](#)



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Freude, Freude; Joy, Joy. In a word, the San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra summed up the spirit of the holiday season at its first holiday concert in recent memory. The Saturday night concert at the California Theatre in San Bernardino featured a 75-member chorus singing works by John Williams, Handel and Beethoven, and glorious performances by all.

Highlights abounded, most notably the programming. Classical orchestral seasonal works are limited, while choral works are plentiful; hence, the chorus, members of Mountainside Master Chorale and Moreno Valley Master Chorale. Pleasantly surprising, three pieces from the movie "Home Alone," full of

composer John Williams' distinctive style, brought a fresh sound to the Christmas music repertoire. The third piece, first words "Merry Christmas," joyfully praised the season and might well become a new normal for the holidays.

A little Handel, including the Hallelujah Chorus (with some fine singing from the audience) and "Hail the Conquering Hero" from "Judas Maccabaeus," warmed up the chorus for a lot of Beethoven, the final movement of the Ninth Symphony. About as serious as classical music gets, it followed a perky, enthusiastic rendering of Leroy Anderson's "Sleigh Ride," which concluded with the best trumpet whinny I've ever heard – a bit of a transition challenge for the listener, but a wonderfully joyous piece for the season.

Short on members – they could have used twice as many – the chorus sang the "Ode to Joy" with great commitment, albeit inarticulately, supporting a spectacular quartet: soprano Begoña Bilbao, mezzo soprano Nandani Maria Sinha, tenor Haqumai Waring Sharpe and baritone Ralph Cato. Brilliantly clear with fine blending and great articulation, the singers showed the audience what this work is supposed to sound like.

Conductor Frank Fetta assertively guided the mélange of voices and instruments to create a work that exploded with great joy and exuberance, much to the delight of the audience.

Another highlight: the bright and articulate brass, especially the trombones. Opening the concert's first piece, Anderson's "Festival of Carols," the light and easygoing yet precise trombones never delivered a sloppy note. Horns, all five of them, without a bobble, pulled off the gentle opening to "Waltz of the Flowers" from the Nutcracker Suite. How blessed is this orchestra to have horns it can trust.

The concert closed with another highlight, an encore piece by Fetta at keyboard, Rob Schaer on muted trumpet, Harvey Newmark on bass and Ralph Cato singing "The Christmas Song," – you know the piece, starts with "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire." Cato's easy and unaffected rendition glowed with caramel and chocolate, while the other three-fourths of the quartet sang backup – what a generous group of singers and a terrific gift for the audience.

The entire concert, actually, was a highlight for the season. Spirited from the downbeat of the first piece to the reprise of the Merry Christmas song from

“Home Alone,” brilliant from the visual treat of all the musicians dressed in holiday colors on black to the choice of music, and rich in talent and commitment, the event must be added to the orchestra’s regular schedule. “I’ll come back to this one,” said one audience member.

At the opening of the concert, Fetta said that Joy was the feeling of the season. With outstanding singers and his fine orchestra, he has created a joyful new tradition; we can only hope.