

Review: San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra concert Sax and Strings on March 1, 2014
by Sherli Leonard, Press Enterprise
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Thank you, San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra, for a delightful concert on Saturday night at the California Theatre for the Performing Arts. An evocative mix of the fresh and the familiar introduced the audience to what Conductor Frank Fetta referred to as the orchestra's heart: the string sections.

Thirty string players, and only string players, performed Bach, Barber, Britten, Glazunov, and Mozart, beating together as one strong, solid and inspired heart.

The familiar - Bach and Mozart - opened and closed the program. With Fetta on harpsichord and 10 string players - three each violins, violas, celli, and one bass - for Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 3, the musicians delivered great energy, exquisite details, and clarity, all over the distracting noise of a blower somewhere in the theater's ceiling.

That same noise vied with the orchestra's playing of Barber's Adagio for Strings. Still, following the simple and carefully unpretentious opening, the orchestra, now 30 in number delivered a lovely performance of this lovely work, demonstrating their capacity to create the stoic intensity of the long drive to the work's unmistakable climax.

Fetta, never stuffy as he chats with the audience, explained the work that would follow Barber: three of the four movement of Benjamin Britten's "Simple Symphony." He promised that "Playful Pizzicato," the work's second movement, would contrast sharply with Barber's long and sensuous lines. Indeed it did, as musicians plucked their instruments' strings with tight, crisp precision, showing off their immense depth of talent.

The three movements, fresh to most of the ears in the audience, ran the gamut of what string players can do, with the third movement (second in this performance) darkly moving, violins digging in deep to pull out the piece's emotion. Fetta's careful and thoughtful conducting brought out the beauty of this music.

Freshest of all the works was Alexander Glazunov's Concerto for Alto Saxophone, played by Matthew Ennis, who seemed to make his instrument do whatever he wanted, whether long, easy, mellow lines, almost imperceptible entrances, warm, smooth transitions, or blisteringly quick runs. Without histrionics, he brought this inviting work to a responsive and appreciative audience.

Ennis followed with an encore, a short work by Spanish composer David Salleras, whom Ennis said we wouldn't know; but surely, after hearing Ennis' marvelous control over the notoriously obstreperous qualities of his chosen instrument as he brilliantly tackled the work, we would love to know it better.

"Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" by Mozart closed the program, leaving the audience feeling oh, so civilized. The orchestra greeted the work with the seeming joy of greeting an old friend, but treated it with immense respect: lovely lightness, sweet hesitations, aggressive attacks, and neat vigor.

Eine fine program.