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Dual symphonies make great opening for San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra

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Programming brilliance almost overshadowed performance brilliance as the San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Conductor Carlo Ponti, opened its concert season Saturday and Sunday. I heard the concert on Sunday at Our Lady of the Lakes Catholic Church, in Lake Arrowhead, a marvelous venue that allowed the orchestra's rich sounds to thrill listeners unlike anything heard at the regular performance hall, the California Theatre in San Bernardino.

Rather than the usual overture-concerto-symphony fare, the program featured two symphonies -- one for the mind and one for the soul -- a programming decision that enabled the audience to savor the orchestra and its capacity to perform a variety of music.

The one for the mind: Franz Schubert's Symphony No. 3 in D major, a centerfold for classical structure. Pleasant, accessible, lyrical, just the right length, the easy-listening symphony showcased the neat and tidy form of early 19th century symphonic works.

full of spirit

The musicians gradually worked into total commitment to the work, slowly developing a sense of stateliness, animation and enthusiasm, so that by the end of the first movement, they were, indeed, con brio -- full of spirit, and the strings' lack of crispness at the opening of the second movement shifted into a focused, full-throttled fourth movement romp with lively sparkle.

The winds -- flute, oboe, and clarinet -- backed by grand horns, provided the through-line with elegant interpretations and articulate executions.

The one for the soul: Jean Sibelius' Symphony No. 2 in D major, a work that reached for the

heart with the first seven, driving notes. This work, unconventional from the start, painted images, created impressions and invited intense listening.

Impassioned from the first notes, the strings delivered big, sweeping lines in the second movement, furious and articulate expressions in the third movement and full-powered depth in the spectacular fourth movement. With its simple six-note motif and Ponti's carefully considered tempi, the fourth movement, in this performance, became goose-bump time.

Timpanist Bruce Anderson grounded the orchestra with impeccable timing and sensitive interpretations, especially evident with the elegantly mysterious pairing with clarinet principal John Gates.

Carefully executed details throughout the work defined its appeal: the still and breathless quality of the bass and cello pizzicato conversation at the opening of the second movement; the poignant bassoon duet over the timpani rumble as the second movement continued; the darkly wrenching trumpet and flute exchange in the third movement; the lovely oboe-clarinet-bassoon-flute moment of calm before the eruption into the fourth movement; the sweet, simple flute and oboe statements near the end of the fourth movement, bringing a sense of rightness and honesty to impressions of grandeur.

Only a doubling of the number of strings -- eight basses instead of four to elicit a cleaner pizzicato, 40 violins rather than 20 to reach the bottom of the soul at the opening -- could have rendered this performance more satisfying.