

San Bernardino: Symphony ends season on grand scale

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The San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra closed its 2010-11 season last weekend under the baton of guest conductor Frank Fetta in a concert that underwhelmed Haydn's Cello Concerto No. 2 and delightfully overwhelmed Mahler's massive Symphony No. 1, "Titan."

First, a disclaimer: Unable to attend the evening concert, with agreement of the conductor and my editor, I attended the final rehearsal at 3 p.m. on Saturday afternoon.

About the underwhelming portion: Cellist Marek Szpakiewicz performed the Haydn Cello Concert, a light and airy piece of pleasant blandness and such the antithesis of the Mahler that, at the first high shimmery notes of the symphony in the concert's second half, the concerto seemed actually drab.

About the overwhelming portion: Wow! This is a conductor's piece, with its constant dynamic, tempo, and meter changes, and Fetta managed the orchestra throughout -- not a small accomplishment.

Extra violins balanced the volume from seven horns, four trumpets and four trombones, enabling the players to play with a rich, strong and lush -- not strained and overplayed -- sound.

The orchestra musically painted the full palette of symphonic colors, from the suspense of a dawning day at the opening of the first movement, trumpets brilliantly clear from off-stage, to the full orchestra sweep into grand motion in the same movement back to the wonderful hush with marvelous control over dynamics, the horns clear even at pianissimo.

The orchestra's performance of the third movement, with the measured and dignified "Frere Jacques" motif in minor, offered a continuous supply of musical treats, from the charming and sensual oboe and trumpet duet over pizzicato, to the muted violins and harp, elegantly and carefully delivered as the movement wound down to a solitary soft gong with timpani.