

Review: San Bernardino Symphony delivers a big, bold program

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Planets and stars neatly lined up for the San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra's season-ending concert Saturday night: exciting and accessible programming, outstanding musicianship, and commanding leadership by conductor Carlo Ponti came together for an invigorating concert that truly celebrated the best of American classical music.

The orchestra's musical explosion into Bernstein's overture to "West Side Story," followed by the classy and careful transition from driving New York City energy to the quiet melody of "Somewhere" left no doubt that they were seriously going to give a concert to remember.

Samuel Barber's "Violin Concerto" tossed the audience a listening challenge and the soloist Edwin Huizinga a technical challenge. Aptly described in the program notes as equally influenced by the "lush imagery of the Romantic period" and the "dissonance and energy" of the 20th century music, the often disquieting piece delivered moments of soaring movie-style music and passages of harsh angst, never too much of either. Throughout, the orchestra performed the work with moving expression and elegant lifting and settling resolutions, taking just enough time to say it right, with Ponti pulling extreme lament out of the orchestra before their music evaporated sweetly at the end of the second movement.

The audience's appreciation of Huizinga's obvious technical wizardry, especially notable in the final movement of perpetual 16th notes, suffered for want of volume. Whether from an unresponsive instrument or from an impassionate performance, much of what Huizinga played seemed underwhelming, often overpowered by the orchestra which, in other performances, has been obediently subdued for the soloist.

Still, Huizinga and the orchestra, with strong and confident strings, treated the audience to an intelligent performance of this seldom-heard but rich work.

And, the Copland "Symphony No. 3" was pure Copland, redolent with those perfect intervals of fourths and fifths, musically asking and answering questions with satisfying regularity. Example: Great big swelling Copland sound dissolves into sweet solo flute. The orchestra's execution was ever-so-pleasing, exuding energy, with every section excelling.

Violins played big and strong, clean and articulate on all that high work of the second movement, and lean and finely expressive in the third movement. Percussion, lead by powerful bass drum and by Bruce Anderson on five timpani drums, powered the work, especially the huge final movement, a wonderful incarnation of Copland's usually stand-alone work, "Fanfare for the Common Man." Horns and brass, spectacularly insistent, open, and unconstrained, drove the second movement that erupted like a summer sunrise on dawn's evocative quiet.

The fourth movement, which evolved sweetly with a flute statement of the "Fanfare" before becoming all brass, all percussion, was all goose-bump time. "Wow," say my notes, more than once. This orchestra gets this hugely optimistic, peculiarly American piece, and they gave it back, with interest, to an appreciative audience.