

ZUILL BAILEY

CELLIST

Cellist steals and shares the show at the Arlington

JOSEF WOODARD - - Santa Barbara News Press - November 15, 2005

It was another weekend with the Santa Barbara Symphony with another promising and eager young contender at the podium. The search for a new conductor to fill Gisèle Ben-Dor's spot continues into its second season of transition. The latest auditioning candidate was Daniel Meyer, a resident conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony and the newly appointed music director of North Carolina's Asheville Symphony Orchestra.

On the evidence of Sunday afternoon's symphony concert at the Arlington Theatre, Mr. Meyer exudes earned confidence and clarity from the podium, without excess or apparent quirks. He delivered the goods reliably in a program framed by repertoire pillars of Mozart and Dvorak, around a potent Shostakovich centerpiece. Our symphony responded in mostly fine form, no doubt acclimated by now to the musical chairs game of transient conductors at the helm.

Beyond matters of second-guessing the candidate's job suitability, though, the real magic of this concert was the result of a palpable musical accord between conductor, orchestra and cello soloist Zuill Bailey. The subject was Shostakovich's strangely gripping Cello Concerto No. 1. Santa Barbara has been reeling in Shostakovich lately, we're happy to report, just in time for a large-scale re-evaluation of the great Russian composer's 20th century music. His epic Seventh Symphony, conducted by Ms. Ben-Dor in May, was the highlight of last season, and the Cello Concerto is a good early bet as one of the current season's high points.

A brisk and beefy reading of Mozart's "Don Giovanni" overture served as the on-ramp to the Shostakovich Concerto, written in 1959 for the great cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. In the outer movements, the concerto teems with the restless vigor so central to the composer's signature style. Romantic instincts are burnished and roughed-up by subtle Modernist brushwork, and the music maintains a delicate balance between melodicism and "difficult" musical notions.

This is a great showpiece for a cellist, and not only in terms of grandstanding pyrotechnics -- although that's part of the fabric, especially in the mad flurries of the finale. More importantly, it's a concerto demanding sensitivity to its pining tenderness and meditative airs, in the second movement and especially once the spotlight focuses on the soloist in the "Cadenza."

One of this work's key features, the Cadenza section is a movement unto itself. Its challenge to a soloist's mettle is that of summoning up a kind of musical dream state, to impress with introspection before things grow suddenly and increasingly manic, leading into the orchestral throes of the Allegro. In this finale, percolating energies and driving eighth notes suggest marching in dizzy, wavering patterns, with the cellist weaving crazily in the metric maze.

Mr. Bailey beautifully conquered the score's implicit challenges. Now based in El Paso, Texas, but an itinerant and in-demand soloist, the cellist seemed particularly enveloped in the music, yet stoic. Sometimes, he gazed off distractedly while playing, duly lost in the score. But, when the time came, he was also fully engaged in the orchestral setting, blending the elements making up the ideal orchestral soloist. Afterward, spirits were justly high onstage, and Mr. Bailey generously acknowledged the orchestra, and he hugged both Mr. Meyer and longtime principal cellist Geoffrey Rutkowski.

After the alternate visceral thrill and hushed enigma of the Shostakovich, the program -- perhaps inevitably -- turned anticlimactic. Post-intermission, the concert reverted to the symphonic romantic comfort food of Dvorak's Symphony No. 7, a solid opportunity for the orchestra to demonstrate its considerable wares. The violins hit a few rough spots, but largely, the performance was a rousing and expressive one, and those weary of Dvorak were at least thankful that we weren't subjected to yet another encounter with his hit, the "New World Symphony."

Overall, the Santa Barbara Symphony's program gave further reason to expect that the decision-making process won't be an easy one once it comes time to pick the new conductor.

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