

Santa Barbara Symphony

Wisdom of the Water, Earth, Sky

- elevating the conversation

Review by **Daniel Kepl** / VOICE

IT ISN'T OFTEN a community has an opportunity to learn about itself through art. Santa Barbara Symphony Music and Artistic Director Nir Kabaretti's carefully crafted program last weekend at the Granada Theatre included a world

premiere by Santa Barbara composer Cody Westheimer, his *Wisdom of the Water, Earth, Sky*; Robert Schumann's love letter to his wife Clara, the *Piano Concerto in A minor*, performed by Pianist Alessio Bax; a gorgeous realization of Jean Sibelius' *Valse Triste*; and a splendidly clean and nuanced performance of Mozart's *Symphony No. 40 in G minor*.

The world premiere of Santa Barbara composer Cody Westheimer's musical, visual, and narrative homage to the Chumash Nation opened Saturday's concert. A one-movement work for orchestra and Chumash language narrators - for this performance, Ernestine Ygnacio-DeSoto and Marianne Parra - enhanced by Westheimer's stunning nature videography, *Wisdom of the Water,*

Earth, Sky is not just wonderfully accessible musically and visually,

but historically and culturally. Westheimer's love-letter to humanity via the cultural heritage and animist folklore of California's Central Coast Chumash people offered Saturday's audience a timely message from first inhabitants about balance and sharing.

The Coplandesque timbre and calming temperament of the opening bars of *Wisdom* immediately established a comfortingly halcyon musical vibe for the listener that gently belied an otherwise complicated and ever morphing compositional structure. Westheimer describes musically, the Chumash story of the origin of dolphins - Chumash who fell into the sea during the rainbow crossing from the Channel Islands to the mainland millennia ago and were saved from death by being transformed into dolphins.

The beauty of the sound of the Chumash language in the dolphin story and other ancient parables about deer (night marauders) and squirrels (saving, sharing, sacrificing), abetted Westheimer's charming musical imagination commiserate with each story told. Finally, in grand strokes of triumphant, wonderfully orchestrated soundscape and stunning videography, the story of the Red Tail Hawk, who sees the world, its potential and failings, from a vantage beyond human conception, marked the thrilling emotional and musical denouement of the work. An epilogue, with sweeping Westheimer-guided drone footage of the natural wonders of this part of the world, accompanied by broad passages of orchestral grandeur and feel-good musical apotheosis, brought the world

premiere of *Wisdom of the Water, Earth, Sky* to a knot-in-your-throat conclusion, and the house to its feet.

One of Santa Barbara's favorite guest artists, pianist Alessio Bax, gave his fans here a performance of the Schumann concerto that was rich in detail, articulate clarity, and stoic power reminiscent of Arthur Rubenstein; note after note ringing clear and true - a stunning display of Bax's physical as well as interpretive mastery of both the instrument and Schumann's mind.

Pianist Alessio Bax has been a frequent visitor to Santa Barbara

for concerto and chamber music appearances over many years, but Saturday's performance of Robert Schumann's *Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54 (1845)* was his first with the Santa Barbara Symphony and conductor Nir Kabaretti. From the first notes of the dramatic first movement, *Allegro affettuoso*, and with nary a flinch or shoulder crunch, Bax set a definitive and thrilling mantra for all to hear - every note of Schumann's monstrously complicated masterpiece would be heard with clarity. The result was a jaw-dropping performance that not only sparkled with action and energy, but revealed passage work usually lost in the balancing game between soloist and orchestra.

Bax's demeanor and electrifying sound presence - clean, articulate, balanced, resolute - reminded this listener of Arthur Rubenstein; gentlemanly, almost stoic posture, pristine articulation with a muscular edge that note for note packed a

satisfying wallop, especially in the powerful cadenza at the end of the first movement. Bax's role as playful lover in the second movement, *Intermezzo-Andantino grazioso*, was appropriately lighthearted, elastic, and coy, while the last movement, *Allegro vivace*, found Bax, Kabaretti, and the orchestra in feisty form, willing collaborators and at a stylish clip, in the nuptial celebration that is the emotional point and practical purpose of the work.

Jean Sibelius' 1903 incidental music for his brother-in-law's rather morbid play, *Kuolema (Death)* included *Valse Triste (Sad Waltz)*, about a dying woman dancing with the ghosts of her past, before dying herself. Conducting from memory, as throughout most of the program, maestro Kabaretti gave his Saturday night audience a gorgeous and moving interpretation of *Valse Triste*, followed by a crackerjack virtuoso performance of Mozart's *Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550*.

Chumash Narrator **Ernestine Ygnacio-DeSoto**Chumash Narrator **Marianne Parra**Composer **Cody Westheimer**Pianist **Alessio Bax**

Daniel Kepl has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews for Santa Barbara publications since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor.

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