

Santa Barbara Chamber Players

# It Takes Community

Review by Daniel Kepl / VOICE

**S**ANTA BARBARA CHAMBER PLAYERS CAME INTO EXISTENCE DURING THE PANDEMIC, when local professional musicians gathered to make music in their homes as live public performances were shut down. In January of this year, with help from the Towbes Fund for the Performing Arts, the Santa Barbara Foundation, the Santa Barbara Bowl Foundation, and the Music Academy, the orchestra gave its first public performance, an unqualified success by any standard.

Last Saturday at Santa Barbara's First Presbyterian Church, Santa Barbara Chamber Players gave the second concert of their inaugural season under the stewardship of founding conductor, Emmanuel Fratianni. The program spoke to the conductor's high musical standards and goals: Borodin's *In the Steppes of Central Asia*, Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, and Lalo Schifrin's *Concerto for Tuba and Orchestra*, with Gene Pokorny, principal tuba of the Chicago Symphony, as soloist.

Conductor Fratianni, a resident of Santa Barbara, has enjoyed a broad portfolio of professional engagements and projects over the years and knows how to make the most of limited rehearsal time. A suitable program opener for the orchestra, Borodin's *In the Steppes of Central Asia*, was conducted by Fratianni in a straightforward manner; nice English horn and clarinet solos, lovely string sonority in the lush bits, well balanced brass ensemble playing – an altogether concise and tidy performance,

in preparation for the remaining two heavyweight works on the program, each posing unique challenges for the new orchestra.

Argentine American pianist, composer, arranger, and conductor, Lalo Schifrin is best known to the public for his large body of iconic film and TV scores over several decades. His journey from a law degree in Argentina to music, began with a scholarship to the Conservatoire de Paris at age 20 in the early fifties, where he learned the art of classical composition while also discovering the world of jazz, playing piano in clubs throughout the city. His *Concerto for Tuba and Orchestra* (2017) reflects this life experience, incorporating Argentine tango, jazz, and classical music elements in a turbulently virtuoso three-movement mélange for tuba and orchestra.

Composed by Schifrin specifically for Gene Pokorny, it was a treat to watch and hear the benefactor play this signature concerto in person, part of a whirlwind American tour performing the work with several orchestras before a performance with Pokorny's home orchestra the Chicago Symphony, this coming summer. In three more or less through composed movements, the *Tuba Concerto* is a take-no-prisoners musical beast – extremely complicated in structure and virtuosic expectation, profoundly tricky for the orchestra, and a bravura showpiece for the solo instrument. Elements of jazz (Paris), tango (Argentina), compositional brilliance (Conservatoire de Paris) and the movies (Hollywood) are all in delightful evidence. It's thick, but a beauty.

Pokorny's vaunted command of this oft-maligned instrument was, well, awesome. His tone quality and lyricism conjured sound images of caramel and melted butter; his technique moved delicately but with the speed of light, unhampered by mere notes, of which there were plenty. Fratianni miraculously kept the tricky bits in sync, while also allowing for camaraderie between soloist and orchestra – impressive. A jolly encore, Schifrin's theme from *Mission Impossible*, brought this segment of the program full circle.

After intermission, the major orchestral work of the evening, Edward Elgar's mystical mystery masterpiece, *Enigma Variations* (1898-99). *Enigma* is not a careless metaphor. Dedicated by the composer to "my friends pictured within," each variation describes someone close to the composer, in considerable if mysterious musical detail. It has taken decades to figure out most, if not all, of the defendants.

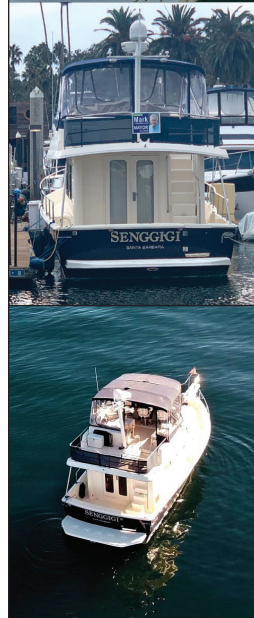
Fratianni had his hands full. *Enigma Variations* is late romantic English music, so must gush and swoon. A codex of personality traits, with distinct musical markers for each behavioral idiosyncrasy of

those described, the work is awash in cabalistic detail, requiring astutely intelligent calibrations by the conductor about color, dynamic effusion, and descriptive purpose. Fratianni chose the less risky path, making sure every section of this elaborate musical puzzle moved forward without incident. If lacking in a certain esprit de corps, the performance was nevertheless, solid.



Tuba soloist **Gene Pokorny**, principal tuba for the Chicago Symphony with SB Chamber Players conductor, **Emmanuel Fratianni**

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