

Santa Barbara Symphony

Launching the new season *in the company of musical friends*

By Daniel Kepl / Special to VOICE

SANTA BARBARA'S CONCERT SEASON OFFICIALLY OPENED LAST WEEKEND at the Granada Theatre with what has become an annual collaborative tradition. Beethoven's eponymous "Ode to Joy" *Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125* was the blockbuster main feature for this year's kick-off concert pair by the Santa Barbara Symphony. Joining the orchestra and Nir Kabaretti were the Santa Barbara Choral Society (Jo Anne Wasserman, Artistic Director, and Conductor), Santa Barbara Community College Quire of Voyces (Nathan Kreitzer, Artistic Director), the Westmont College Choir (Daniel Gee, Director of Choral Activities), and the Adelfos Ensemble (Temmo Korisheli, Artistic Director). The four vocal soloists for the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth were Johanna Will soprano, Christina Pezzarossi Ramsey mezzo-soprano, John Matthew Myers tenor, and Cedric Berry bass-baritone.

One constant among many in Santa Barbara's vibrant cultural life is Santa Barbara Symphony Music and Artistic Director Nir Kabaretti. Not only is this small city on the American Riviera lucky to have such an internationally famous conductor in residence, he's a nice guy and sensitive artist to boot. Most importantly, maestro Kabaretti is devoted to contributing to our city's artistic well-being and growth. Collaboration is his magic baton, and last weekend's Santa Barbara Symphony Season opener was the latest of several collaborations the maestro has put together over the years of his tenure here between the orchestra and other performing arts groups in Santa Barbara.

Conducting the program entirely from memory, Kabaretti opened with a florid version of the chorus *The Promise of Living*, from Aaron Copland's opera *The Tender Land*. A perfect vocal warm up for massed choirs, Copland's elegant and inspiring music also pressed an important message home for all of us to think about in these times: "The promise of growing with faith and with knowing, is born of our sharing our love with our neighbor. The promise of ending in right understanding is peace in our hearts, peace with our neighbor."

Franz Liszt's *Les preludes* (1845-54), is probably the most famous of his 13 tone poems for orchestra. Kabaretti took full advantage of his players' expertise, and delivered an unusually beautiful, elegantly crafted performance that not once lost itself in excess. Balances between sections were clean and clear to the ear (brass suspensions this listener had never heard before for example).

After intermission, Beethoven's still amazing, still mystifying, still profoundly moving, and essentially immortal *Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125* (1822-24). *Symphony No. 9* was Beethoven's last. The structure is four movements, but the substance of each of those four is revolutionary, particularly the last movement, where Beethoven utilizes massed choirs, four vocal soloists, a marching band, and storm's fury to accommodate Friedrich Schiller's *An die Freude* (*Ode to Joy*).

Kabaretti, who has conducted Beethoven's masterpiece on several occasions in various venues worldwide, made it clear by his relaxed but confident manner, he and his incredible orchestra were in familiar, even intimate territory. The first three movements, all instrumental, were a wonder of refinement and taste. Power when needed was rounded and beautiful, the quiet moments, as in the third movement *Adagio molto e cantabile*, convinced this listener Kabaretti had homeland on his mind; a supremely moving performance by all.

What hasn't been said about the last movement? It's beginning to be clear, as misunderstandings and copying mishaps are sorted out, Beethoven's tempos were exactly what he said they were to be – fast. He even notated these fast tempos in the score using the newly invented metronome. Nobody believed him. It will take a long while to spread the word about the exhilaration of performing the last movement at Beethoven's tempos. Conductor Kabaretti was ahead of the pack. Fast! The result, as choristers, orchestra, soloists, and audience alike discovered was a whirlwind of energy as Beethoven wanted it; thrilling, fast-paced, full of surprises.

The combined choirs sang with new intensity, wonderful balance, and inspiring exaltation – all brightness and fast-paced, exactly as Beethoven wanted it. Ditto the four soloists, whose narratives in ensemble and solo made for conversational not lugubrious vocal exchanges, a pleasure to enjoy. Tenor John Matthew Myers dug in and pushed the tempo of his narrative with vigor. The emotional result was breathtaking, his voice solid. Balance between the four soloists in the famous and brutal solo quartet passages found bass-baritone Cedric Berry in particularly rich low voice. Mezzo Christina Pezzarossi Ramsey made a marvel for the ears of her mid-range color and intelligent articulative maneuvers to accommodate Beethoven's inner lines with clarity and style. Soprano Johanna Will



Photo by Nik Blaskovitch

navigated the notorious heights of her part with considerable clarity, her highest range holding well.

The Santa Barbara Symphony must have relished Kabaretti's more correct tempos, particularly for the German marching band tune in the *Alla Marcia* section.

As for the audience reaction? No kidding, the last movement held us all in a trance of excitement. During brief musical silences, not a sound in the hall. Beethoven's Choral Symphony always earns standing ovations wherever it's performed. It's that kind of masterpiece. But there was something different in the air at last weekend's performances. Audience, choristers, soloists, musicians knew they had just performed the *Ode to Joy* as Beethoven intended – at last. Very exciting!

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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