

Music Academy Festival Orchestra

JoAnn Falletta:

Surprises & Satisfactions

Review by Daniel Kepi / VOICE

American conductor JoAnn Falletta is one of those extraordinary forces of art and nature who tears the fabric of convention to shreds but always tidies up the scene of each of her several apotheoses.

Importantly, she never looks back. The litany of orchestras Falletta has helmed and recordings she's made is legion. Watching her conducting last Saturday's Music Academy Festival Orchestra concert at the Granada Theatre, a concoction of spicy magical realism (Roberto Sierra's *Fandangos*), French angst (Maurice Ravel's *La Valse*), and Russian mystery (Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances, Op. 45*), it became clear immediately Falletta was not just in charge but in supreme command of every color-filled, rhythm-bursting moment of *Fandangos* and later, the Ravel (a revelatory performance), and moody Rachmaninoff.

Walking onto the Granada stage last Saturday looking for all the world like a worried mom fussing over her massive family of musicians, JoAnn Falletta's conducting

– straight and clean and clear, but not particularly charismatic – did not in the first nanoseconds of the evening appear to be lighting any fires. Then the high brass fanfares began in the opening moments of the Sierra piece – unique sparkles of thrillingly complicated color. Falletta, still no-nonsense about stick technique, nevertheless began a slow melt into a subtler and palpably effective body language of rhythm and pulse that successfully lured her colleagues into a slow-dance crescendo of such excited intensity the piece reached full rollicking throttle while the audience held its breath; a spectacular take by Roberto Sierra on two earlier fandangos by predecessors Soler and Boccherini. The orchestra, now thoroughly seasoned as an ensemble for this, its next to last concert of the summer season, gave *Fandangos* a slick performance, and Falletta 120 percent of their attention.

Before conducting Maurice Ravel's *La valse* (1919-1920), JoAnn Falletta took a few minutes to instruct the audience about the piece. Both *La valse* and *Boléro* (1928) hold messages in their harmonic and structural incongruities. Ravel, a survivor barely, of World War I was injured physically and psychologically by the experience. *La Valse*, like *Boléro*, eventually collapses of its own weight and hysteria; the waltz pattern in *La valse* is a musical totem to antebellum Europe, washed away in a confused tidal wave of blood and despair.

The opening bars, conducted by Falletta as a throbbing heartbeat, were just the first of several interpretive revelations brought to the listener's attention. Little pockets of color not noticed before came into audible play under



Photo by Zach Mendez

American composer JoAnn Falletta

Falletta's microscopic attentions. And with unerring noblesse oblige, Falletta advocated on behalf of Ravel's sense of duty and outrage about the effects of world conflict on societies. Finesse and elasticity of bar line, orchestral sighs and pouts, ominous forebodings from the bottom of the orchestra that build to its hysterical climax – made for a particularly thoughtful and inspired interpretation of *La valse*.

Sergei Rachmaninoff's last major composition, the *Symphonic Dances, Op. 45* (1940), were composed during the composer's only stay in the United States at Centerport, New

York, overlooking Long Island Sound. Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra premiered the work in January 1941, as another world war began to ravage the European continent, including the composer's homeland. Falletta and the Festival Orchestra plumbed the richly Russo-nostalgic three dances of the suite with particular emphasis on Rachmaninoff's gorgeous orchestrations, including his lush string writing, which Falletta dug into with unabashed gusto. Balances throughout and between various sections of the orchestra were carefully tweaked by the conductor for maximum color. If heartbreak were an instrument, Rachmaninoff's use of alto sax, his breathtaking melodies for high strings, his orchestral whispers and sighs describe the composer's homesickness with passion. Falletta, whose powers of persuasion are those of a goddess – gentle, and without error – gave her Festival Orchestra colleagues several lessons in the art of interpretation, and her audience several opportunities to cheer.

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