

Santa Barbara Symphony

Civilization and Its Challenges

– Sigmund Freud meets Miguel del Águila et al . . .

Review by **Daniel Kepl** / VOICE

A MUSICAL JOURNEY ACROSS THE GREAT AMERICAN PLAINS by train was the imagery for an unusually beautiful reflection on the excitement and challenges of immigrant experience portrayed by the Santa Barbara Symphony, under the guidance of Maestro Nir Kabaretti, for their 2023 season opener at the Granada Theatre.

Music of Elmer Bernstein (*Toccata for Toy Trains Concert Suite*), Miguel del Águila (*Concerto for Violin: El Viaje de una Vida-The Journey of a Lifetime*) and Antonin Dvořák (*Symphony No. 9, From the New World*) neatly tagged the source of the immigrant surge (improved transportation),

the finality of leaving one's homeland never to return, and the bittersweet lessons, psychological and otherwise, telegraphed poignantly to the old world, from the new.

Opening the program, Elmer Bernstein's charming wind and percussion chamber music score (eight players) for a short 1957 stop action animation film by Charles and Ray Eames, *Toccata for Toy Trains*, freshened up a bit with a new arrangement by Elmer's son, Peter. About 17 minutes in length, the concert suite is pure neoclassicism – think Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*. For all its innocent charm, the score is also tricky for its subtle bravura. Kudos in particular to Santa Barbara Symphony principal trumpet Jon Lewis for reliably spot-on virtuosity, and the chamber group for tight, characterful

playing.

Miguel del Águila's *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 94, El viaje de una vida - The Journey of a Lifetime* (2007), is a stunningly accessible if beastly difficult recent entrant in the violin concerto sweepstakes. Its four movements – *Crossing the Ocean to a New World, In the Purple Land, The Return, and Finale* – the violin soloist accepting the musical mantle of protagonist throughout the work, contemplate the gauntlet of physical as well as psychological challenges all immigrants face when leaving their homeland for a foreign land and culture. De Águila himself a living witness to the immigrant struggle, having traveled from his native Uruguay to the United States (where he received his American citizenship) as a young man, then to Europe for a period of years and back again to America in 1992, has created a score as sweeping as the oceans, actual and allegorical, that separate whole continents and peoples.

Puerto Rican violinist/conductor Guillermo Figueroa, who premiered del Águila's concerto in 2007 and has been performing it around the

world ever since, was the featured soloist last weekend in Santa Barbara, approaching its virtuoso musical cautionary tales with the sublime self-confidence of one who owns the work – every note of it. The orchestra and Kabaretti jostled and tarried, danced and pivoted, meter changes flying in all directions like bats out of hell while Figueroa, sanguine in his complete mastery of the piece, kept things steady, well-paced, and pertinent. As encore, fellow Porto Rican Ernesto Cordero's *Concertino Tropical*.

A particularly expressive and finely honed performance of Antonin Dvořák's *Symphony No. 9, From the New World*, found the Santa Barbara Symphony in first-rate professional fettle, Kabaretti conducting from memory with the authority of dozens of performances over the years under his belt. Likewise, the orchestra personnel. Nuanced phrasing, careful balances, an indefatigable horn section (yes!), tight percussion battery, super elegant wind and low brass section playing, and lush string ensemble cohesion and color spoke truth to the notion that under Kabaretti's leadership and humanity, the Santa Barbara Symphony might well be one of the best regional orchestras on the west coast.

Portugal, Castles, & Pipe Organs?

Santa Barbara music critic **Daniel Kepl** is taking a small group of participants on a 12-day tour of Portugal June 8-19, 2023, which will focus on visiting the cathedrals and historic pipe organs of the country. Stays in Lisbon and Porto will be supplemented by day trips to the Douro River Valley, Guimarães, Braga, Coimbra, Fátima, Mafra, and the city of castles, Sintra. There are three spaces left for this trip. Full itinerary and costs: <https://emeritiphilharmonic.com/>



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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