Symphonically, jazzily beloved

Santa Barbara Symphony deftly blends jazz-related works with Beethoven

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One doesn't normally think of jazz and symphonic Beethovenia as natural allies or concert program mates. But something genuinely clicked last weekend at the Granada, when the Santa Barbara Symphony dared to match a jazz-flavored opening half — with famously jazz-esque music by Darius Milhaud and Aaron Copland — and a second half of orchestral music in the form of Beethoven's mostly cheerful and bounding Seventh Symphony. These musical characters got along famously, in what was clearly one of the highlights — if not the highlight — of the Symphony's season.

Frenchman Milhaud, who would go on to move to America and become a protégé of jazz great Dave Brubeck (and, at Music Academy of the West, Burt Bacharach), is perhaps best remembered as a member of the composer group known as "Les Six" and the man behind perhaps the earliest important jazz-inspired classical piece from 1922, "Le Creaton du Monde." Originally a ballet, but usually performed sans dance, the fairly regularly-programmed piece preceded Gershwin's later, more earnest efforts at finding a synthesis of European classical music and American jazz.

For this occasion, it could be said that the "dance" or visual movement element was supplied by young Santa Barbara-raised animator Carolyn Chrisman, who recently graduated from USC. Her pictorial and narrative logic, by turns cosmic and natural worldly, loosely follows the loosely-intended theme behind Milhaud's ballet, a jazzy "big bang" theory with touches of Stravinsky's primitive-modernist "Rite of Spring" landmark, born a decade earlier.

Scoring for a compact 18-piece ensemble, including that jazz-identified instrument the saxophone, it is a beautifully And, yes, swinging piece with a special place in 20th century music.

A recurring, blue-noted motif is passed around the ensemble, fugue-fashion, and perky notions mix in with the moodier persuasions. The score has a lonely, wistful-yet-hopeful atmosphere, a unique flair in the tender early phase of the "jazz age," though across the drink.

Jazz literally, and logically, made a pact with the classical world in the case of Copland's Clarinet Concerto, commissioned by swing era legend Benny Goodman. This proved a perfect time and opportunity to showcase one of the Symphony's own rank and file, being the impressive principal clarinetist Donald Foster.

Shining up front in the spotlight, but clearly in collaborative accord with his orchestra colleagues — both musically and in terms of friendly mutual gestures around the stage — Mr. Foster delivered the protagonist role with a memorable mix of bravura and controlled subtlety. Plus, that elusive but critical swing factor was discreetly stirred into the performance, without making an exaggerated point of it.

This concerto starts slowly and gently, with a lyrical melodic line on clarinet, in a movement marked "Slowly and expressively." A rich and characterful solo cadenza, gleamingly realized here, segues into the restlessly driving "Rather fast" second movement.

A moving and important American work, it remains one of the very few examples of a successful mediation between the disparate languages of jazz and classical vocabulary, although the balance is decidedly tipped toward that familiar Copland-like voice and harmonic palette. We sense "Appalachian Spring" and "Billy the Kid" lurking and shuffling around the corners and under the pillows of the score.

At the same time, though, aspects of and aspirations toward jazz can be detected in the often angular, register-leaping clarinet part, both searching and declarative. The score also entails a playful manipulation and fragmentation of the thematic material, almost as if the composer is improvising with his own set of ideas folded into the work.

Of course, the sense and illusion of themes and musical worlds, unfolding in a seemingly improvisational way, has long been a hallmark of the greatest "serious" music, including Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. The four-movement symphony, a generally hale and high-spirited opus among Beethoven's symphonies — with the famous slow, almost funereal slow section — opened in due crisp, propulsive form. After channeling the musing melancholy of the slow movement, from the low strings outward, it resumed its rigor for the last two, relatively angst-free movements to the finale.

Overall, the Symphony's maestro Nir Kabaretti flexed a strong and supple hand with the orchestra on this program, bolstered by both adventurous — while ear-friendly — 20th century fare and a solid, nicely nuanced treatment of a classic of the orchestral repertoire. The concert reminded us that we have a wonderful symphony in our midst, both as a whole and, in the case of fine musicians such as Mr. Foster, parts suitable for upfront showcasing.

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