Review: Santa Barbara Symphony at the Granada Theatre

By Charles Donelan

Clarinet and the Creation on Sunday, April 13

Wednesday, April 16, 2014

The French modernist composer Darius Milhaud gave as much to the American musical tradition as he took from it, as he was an important mentor to both Dave Brubeck and Burt Bachrach during the time he spent teaching composition at Mills College. Milhaud came to this country with an intense feeling for melody, and a taste for the polyphonic language of jazz. At Sunday’s concert by the Santa Barbara Symphony, Milhaud’s La Creation du Monde displayed both these qualities of melody and polyphony to great effect, with a relatively small and thoroughly string-free ensemble onstage executing the music, and a short animated film by Santa Barbara native Carolyn Chrisman projected above their heads to illustrate its narrative, which was originally told through ballet. Following the Milhaud, the Symphony’s principal clarinetist, Donald T. Foster, stepping forward to play the Clarinet Concerto of Aaron Copland, a piece inspired (and premiered) by the great Benny Goodman. It begins slowly, with the clarinet playing long lines in close harmony with the orchestra, and then bursts into a virtuosic cadenza intended to evoke the syncopations of Latin jazz. Foster played brilliantly, and acknowledged the standing ovation he received first with a short solo encore, and then by a definitive ending which involved removing the mouthpiece from his instrument for all to see.

After the intermission, maestro got down to some serious Beethoven business by conducting a fierce and rapid rendition of the composer’s 7th symphony. It’s always been a pleasure to watch Kabaretti on the podium—he’s graceful, athletic, and full of energy. But on this particular performance, he seemed to find a new gear, reaching deep inside to pull out every ounce of passion and grandeur in this immortal work. The orchestra followed him attentively, and the result was an unforgettable afternoon with one of the world’s best loved pieces of music.