When Jazz met Beethoven, Symphonically

THE SANTA BARBARA SYMPHONY FEATURES THE JAZZ-FLAVORED WORK OF DARIUS MILHAUD AND AARON COPLAND, WITH CLARINETIST DONALD FOSTER IN THE BENNY GOODMAN ROLE, PERFORMING BEETHOVEN’S SEVENTH SYMPHONY

At first blush, the intriguing program for this weekend’s Santa Barbara Symphony concerts might seem an attraction of opposites. In one orchestral showcasing corner, we have Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony, and in a separate corner, two ear-friendly early 20th century works with strong jazz connections, Darius Milhaud’s “Le Creacion du la Monde” and Aaron Copland’s Clarinet Concerto.

It could be said, though, that all the music in this symphony evening somehow finds a common ground in the sense of composers drawing on “vernacular” sounds outside of their classical foundations. They all followed their passions, instincts and, in Copland’s case, commissioners’ tendencies (it was commissioned by the great jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman), in writing music, tilling the soil of “serious” music, as such, and what was in the more popular musical air of their respective eras.

Beethoven’s Seventh is one of those odd delights in his Symphonic output, a pastoral and rustic invention that folds folk tunes into the process, while Frenchman Milhaud channeled his love of jazz to create what is generally regarded as the first major classical-jazz merging — even before Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue.” (Milhaud went on to migrate to America and teach such important jazz and pop icons as Dave Brubeck and Burt Bacharach).

One of the special treats of this Santa Barbara Symphony program is its focus on a musician from the symphonic ranks, upgraded and moved to stage front, in the soloist position. Longtime principal clarinetist Donald Foster will be taking on the Copland opus, assuming the “role” of Benny Goodman, you could say. In a recent interview, Mr. Foster discussed such subjects as the beauty and swing of Copland, life in the Southern California musical epicenter, and the 805 orchestra he has played with for many years.

News-Press: You are stepping into the soloist spotlight on the upcoming Symphony program. Is there a special feeling when you perform as soloist in conjunction with an ensemble you’re a part of, a kind of communal spirit maybe you don’t get when you are in a visiting soloist role?

Donald Foster: Indeed. One of the great things about soloing with the orchestra that you regularly play with is that extra camaraderie that comes with playing with close friends. When there are special moments — and there are many in the Copland — I can literally look at who I am playing a passage with and feel supported, and with a team-like atmosphere.

News-Press: Between the Copland Concerto and Milhaud’s famous early jazz-inspired piece, this upcoming program has a pretty strong jazz flavor to it — alongside the Beethoven symphonic element. Were you have you been involved in jazz, along with classical playing over the years?

Donald Foster: Although I have never practiced or even attempted true jazz improvisation, I do feel as though I was lucky enough to inherit the ability to "swing," in the jazz tradition. It has come in handy whether playing a piece like the Copland or even the famous opening of “Rhapsody in Blue,” but it has also served me well in the studio when playing on a film score, for say, Randy Newman, who very often to the line between classical and jazz idioms in his music.

News-Press: Is the Copland Concerto something you have both really internalized and also made new discoveries about each time you re-approach it? What makes this Concerto distinctive, for you, and would you say the clarinet is one of those instruments that doesn’t get as much solo attention as it should. Have you felt that way?

Donald Foster: The clarinet repertoire is particularly interesting. While you are right, we don’t have a ton of truly “warhorse” like pieces that show us in a soloist setting, what we do have is remark-

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able. Think about it: Mozart, Brahms, Debussy, Copland, Bernstein, Beethoven, Corigliano, all have written important concertos or chamber pieces featuring the clarinet. And while we might not have hundreds of pieces like the piano or the violin, I like to think that what we do have is small in number but huge in musicality.

The Copland is an extremely special piece for me. Commissioned by Benny Goodman, it is one of the most perfect clarinet pieces that shows practically everything that the clarinet can do — play extremely soft, play extremely loud, play high, play low, play heartbreakingly lyrical, or flat out jazzy and crude. The famous slow opening was admittedly one of Copland’s proudest writings. He calls it a “pas-de-deux between the orchestra and the clarinet,” as though they are truly dancing partners. It’s stunning, and I’m so lucky to get to play it with SBSo.

NP: You are performing as principal clarinetist with two Southern California orchestras, in Pasadena and Santa Barbara. There is a general understanding that the caliber and quantity of good musicians in SoCal is quite high, partly because of the presence of studio work as well as a healthy classical music scene in the region. Is studio work something you enjoy doing, and do you find it’s refreshing parallel musical life to your classical work? Or do they cross-infiltrate and cross-influence each other?

DF: One of the truly great things about being active in the freelance scene in Southern California, whether it’s in the studio setting or the orchestral stage, is the immense pleasure in hearing my colleagues. Very often it is said that “the best musicians in the world are in L.A.,” and while I am certainly not going to get into that debate since I am probably biased, one only has to visit the orchestras around town or the film studio sound stages to be blown away.

Recently, for example, we were working on the newest film version of “Godzilla” which is coming out soon. The phenomenal Alexandre Desplat was the composer and conductor. There was a monstrous (pun intended) brass section set up in an antiphonal setting at the Sony scoring stage. What those brass players had to play — sight reading, mind you — over and over again simply boggled the mind. It was a pleasure to just be in the room, much less contributing to the music of this film. There are countless examples of this type of thing.

It’s one thing to have the work for “works” sake, but it’s a whole different level of pride to hear your colleagues continually put forth such incredible artistry.

NP: You were a founding member of the conductor-free chamber orchestra in L.A., Mldi. That sounds like an ambitious project, something akin to groups such as the Orpheus and the Knights, amounting to a possible trend. What motivated that project, and what is its status now?

DF: Mldi, sadly, was a victim of the economic downturn and is no longer. We were active for about seven years, and you are right, we governed based on the Orpheus process. It was an incredibly rewarding experience — not only musically, but I learned a lot about “people skills” and leadership, as well as business skills about non-profit organizations, etc.

I also got a unique perspective on just how bloody difficult it is to make an orchestra succeed from a financial perspective. What our administration does on our behalf behind the scenes is often a thankless act, and I have an immense appreciation for what they and volunteers do, having worked intimately with Mldi.

NP: The Santa Barbara Symphony is a strong and polished orchestra in its current state. How do you view this orchestra, in terms of other orchestras of its scale and city size, and how have things changed within the orchestra during your time there?

DF: Having been in the orchestra for 16 years, I have witnessed incredible changes with the orchestra. Not only have we made obvious changes like our venue (Arlington to the Granada) and our Music Director (from Gisle Ben-Dor to Nir Kabaretti), there have been incredible changes in administration, staff and even working conditions. Our pay has gone up dramatically and this has directly impacted the immense talent that we now attract. Just as an example, we recently had trumpet auditions that had something like 70 applicants. Some of the applicants were even from overseas. I just don’t think 10 years ago this would have been the case. Artistically, the orchestra just gets better and better. It’s a joy to play up here.

NP: With all of your various musical activities and associations at present, do you feel that you have a good working balance of projects and challenges in your musical life at this point? Are there particular ambitions or other areas you’d like to explore?

DF: I love my life. I have a fantastic and supportive spouse, a diverse career that takes me from the classroom setting at Moreno Valley College, to the sound stages of the leading Los Angeles studios, to the concert halls of Disney Hall in downtown Los Angeles to the Granada Theater in Santa Barbara and every little variation in between.

The areas I would like to pursue are probably those that do not involve music at all. I would like to be able to travel more. I have a love affair with food and there is nothing more rewarding to me than traveling the world with a napkin. Sometimes I feel like I work too much, and I think all musicians tend to feel that way about their lives, but I do know how lucky I am.

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Donald Foster performed May, 2012, with the Santa Barbara Symphony at The Granada Theatre.