

Guitarist Jason Vieaux with Symphony Silicon Valley

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Review: Tatsuya Shimono's Symphony Silicon Valley debut

By Richard Scheinin

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Richard Strauss once declared, "I don't see why I shouldn't write a symphony about myself. I find myself quite as interesting as Napoleon or Alexander." There may have been some tongue-in-cheek-ness behind the comment, or maybe not: Strauss's "Ein Heldenleben" ("A Hero's Life") generally is heard as a depiction of the composer's own exploits, with its musical battlefields and portraits of his chattering critics, as well as his wife, Pauline. The panoramic tone poem is a showcase and a challenge for any orchestra -- surely a fitting work with which to put a cap on Symphony Silicon Valley's final program of the season. Saturday's performance at the California Theatre, the first of two, was vital and dramatic, sweeping through the hall with its juicy melodies and stormy interludes. Guest conductor Tatsuya Shimono - - a dynamo, whose signaling is crisp, clear and sweepingly expressive -- connected with his players. Viewed from the balcony, the performance looked and felt like a real collaboration, if not a love affair.

There were 92 musicians on stage, including arrays of nine horns (principal Meredith Brown was excellent, consistently in the spotlight) and five trumpets (three of whom ducked offstage for a military fanfare). There were five busy percussionists, a pair of equally busy harpists -- and even the tubas (Ryan Black and expert principal Tony Clements) were front and center, as Strauss summons all sorts of colors with his score. It hands out solos like candies: principal clarinetist Michael Corner, principal oboist Pamela Hakl and principal bassoonist Deborah Kramer were among those who shone.

For this listener, though, there were two heroes. One was trumpeter Kale Cumings, leading the troops amid the crash and thunder of the battle scene. The other was associate concertmaster Christina Mok, playing the extended solo in which Strauss depicts wife

Pauline: "She is very complex, very much a woman," said the composer, who married Pauline in 1894. Reflecting some of that era's prevalent male attitudes, he also called her "a little depraved, something of a flirt, never twice alike, every moment different from what she was the moment before."

Mok's playing was lyric, then bracing, then coy; she effectively narrated the solo, with its various episodes and moods. And she was technically commanding. Was it a flawless performance by the orchestra? Nope. There was occasional soupiness in the strings, and not every sectional entrance got nailed. But sometimes a performance is more than the sum of its parts. This was exciting music-making, led by Shimono, who flew in from Japan, where he is principal guest conductor of Tokyo's Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra. Hopefully, he will be back.

Oh, something more: The program had a third hero, classical guitarist Jason Vieaux, a renowned player whose tastes and talents run from Bach to Pat Metheny. Friday, he performed Rodrigo's Concierto de Aranjuez, that intensely Spanish concerto for guitar, generally described as the most popular and iconic work of the classical guitar literature. Yet when was the last time you actually saw it performed? This listener can't even remember a last time.

Vieaux can stretch a chord like taffy, while letting each component note sparkle. Not surprisingly, the Adagio -- you may know the Miles Davis-Gil Evans adaptation on "Sketches of Spain" -- was the most arresting

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movement, if only because it is the most beautiful. There was such melancholy in Vieaux's playing, and in his sharing of the principal theme with English hornist Patricia Emerson Mitchell, a marvelous player. As for the cadenza, it was fleet and prismatic in the hands of Vieaux, whose fingers rained color and clarity.

The program began with Ravel's orchestration of Debussy's piano work "Tarantelle styrienne." Rhythmically, it got off to a shaky start, and wasn't ever entirely shored up. But even here, Shimono incited the orchestra to some arresting effects: flares of color and light, hints of what was to come during this fine musical night.

