

Review: S.F. Symphony premiere puts everyone through their paces

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The composer John Corigliano put a canny subtitle on his exciting new concerto, “Triathlon,” and you have to look carefully or you’ll miss it. It’s a concerto for *saxophonist* — not saxophone — and orchestra, because the piece calls for one soloist playing three different instruments: soprano, alto and baritone saxes, each with its own set of technical and expressive demands.

As the title suggests, it’s a workout.

[Timothy McAllister](#), the American virtuoso who gave the piece its world premiere on Thursday, April 7, with the San Francisco Symphony, emphasized the point before a note had even been played, by coming onto the stage of Davies Symphony Hall clad in bright white athletic shoes. Then he gave the piece the knockout performance it deserved, full of rhythmic agility and dynamic power.

He had a terrific partner, too, in Giancarlo Guerrero, the Costa Rican conductor whose 13-year tenure as music director of the Nashville Symphony has given that orchestra a reputation for adventurous programming and execution. Guerrero’s San Francisco Symphony debut revealed a performer of seemingly unstoppable energy, a quality that infused the entire program.

Still, Corigliano’s 30-minute extravaganza, which the Symphony had originally commissioned for a 2020 premiere that was delayed by the COVID pandemic, was the

highlight of Thursday’s matinee program. It grabbed a listener’s attention from the first notes, and lingered long in the memory after everything else had passed.

At 84, Corigliano remains one of the great showmen of the contemporary classical world, a consummate entertainer who knows how to write music that will dazzle an audience without compromising its artistic integrity in the slightest. In his symphonies, operas, concertos and film scores (“Altered States,” “The Red Violin”), he finds a perfect balance between accessibility and adventure, and “Triathlon” would seem to be a worthy addition to that catalog.



In spoken remarks from the stage, Corigliano revealed that the score began life as a triptych of separate mini-concertos, and each movement does create its own sound world (although the return of material from the first movement to form a brief coda at the end of the score isn’t remotely out of place).

In the opening “Leaps,” Corigliano lays out an array of whiz-bang sound effects and springy melodic themes, then sets the orchestra and soloist on a breathless rapid-fire chase. In “Lines,” the central slow movement, the alto sax sustains a ruminative melody at implausible length, while the orchestra parks itself on shimmery, long-held chords. Finally, “Licks” has the baritone sax execute a series of complex technical flourishes extending all across the instrument’s range.

And that description only covers the concerto’s bullet points; within each movement there are contrasting sections, bravura pieces of writing for the orchestra, and quick-hit melodies that dazzle and then vanish. There’s a lot going on.

In his first appearance with the Symphony, McAllister gave a fluent demonstration of what his instrument — *all* his instruments — can do. He tore his way nimbly through intricate passagework, shaped lyrical melodies with the grace of an opera singer, and gave the piece all the theatrical panache it wanted.

If nothing else on the program quite equaled the pizzazz of that concerto, it certainly gave an enticing glimpse of Guerrero’s muscular, extroverted conducting style, and of his wide-ranging musical interests — every piece on the program was new to the Symphony’s repertoire.

“An American Port of Call,” a 1985 tone poem by the African American composer Adolphus Hailstork depicting the waterfront of Norfolk, Va., burst forth in angular, bustling episodes. “Mediodía en el Llano,” by the 20th century Venezuelan composer Antonio Estévez Aponte, was a gorgeous evocation of noontime stillness, and “Sinfonia Buenos Aires,” the ambitious

1953 creation of tango master Astor Piazzolla, provided a chance for the orchestra to push itself to extremes (Daniel Binelli was the eloquent soloist on the accordion-like bandoneon).

Throughout the afternoon, Guerrero proved a vibrant, commanding podium figure, with a clear and exacting beat and a gift for shifting between ferocity and tenderness. I’m already looking forward to his return.

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