



Review: Santa Barbara Symphony's *Porgy and Bess*

A Rousing Season Finale for the Symphony at the
Granada on Saturday, May 16

By Charles Donelan

Tue May 19, 2015 | 10:30am

As maestro Nir Kabaretti enters his second decade with the Santa Barbara Symphony, the time feels right not so much for retrospection as for celebration. Last Saturday night, the symphony's executive director, David Pratt, announced from the Granada stage that Kabaretti has signed a contract to conduct the orchestra for at least another three years, and that's very good news. His blend of personal warmth, intellectual rigor, and consummate musicianship has moved the organization forward on a number of fronts throughout his tenure, and thus the next three-year stint – or decade for that matter – promises to be a rich one.

The symphony's season finale concert featured one of the ambitious yet community-centered collaborations that have become a Kabaretti specialty. A version of George and Ira Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess* brought the orchestra together with two outstanding vocalists, soprano Laquita Mitchell and bass-baritone Michael Sumuel, and the Santa Barbara Choral Society under the direction of JoAnne Wasserman. Wasserman and Kabaretti have developed into a formidable team, and Saturday's program may have been their most spectacular

success yet. The combination of heartfelt musical virtuosity and Broadway razzle-dazzle on display hit just the right spot with a large and appreciative audience.

The first half of the program showed off another aspect of what the Santa Barbara Symphony has become under Kabaretti's leadership – an exemplary orchestra for teasing out what's most poetic and sophisticated in the American music that has grown up around the motion picture industry. Both the *Arioso for Oboe, Percussion, and Strings* of Dan Redfeld and the *Symphony No. 2, Op. 30* of Howard Hanson participate in the cosmopolitan yet accessible style pioneered by other Americans such as George Gershwin and Elmer Bernstein.

Speaking of the Gershwin brothers, *Porgy and Bess* remains their greatest single contribution to American music. There's no better love duet than "Bess, You Is My Woman Now," and Mitchell and Sumuel swung it to the rafters. The chorus sounded magnificent, as well, especially on the encore, "Oh Lawd, I'm on My Way."

Thu Jul 02, 2020 | 01:46am

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