

By Daniel Kepl – Voice Magazine, November 25th 2016

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WHAT A TREAT! Two world-class pianists, one of whom is a Santa Barbara resident, an orchestra that has reached a level of professionalism and ensemble cohesion under conductor Nir Kabaretti that confirms with each concert, its standing as one of the best in the region, and a program of works for pianos and orchestra so interesting, the evening flew by. The piano soloists, our own Natasha Kislenko, and German born Markus Groh, whose career spans the globe, worked together as a superbly blended team for Mozart's Concerto for Two Pianos in E-flat Major, K. 365, and each had opportunity to display their unique pianistic personalities during Manuel de Falla's Nights in the Gardens of Spain (Kislenko) and Tchaikovsky's monumental Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat Minor, Op. 23 (Groh).

The program opened with Andalusian composer Manuel de Falla's fabulously colorful and evocative tone poem for piano and orchestra, Nights in the Gardens of Spain, Symphonic Impressions for Piano and Orchestra. Russian-born Natasha Kislenko is on the piano faculties at UCSB and the Music Academy of the West and also enjoys a busy out-of-town career giving performances and masterclasses throughout the US, Italy, Turkey, Germany, Bulgaria, and Russia. From the first movement's opening orchestral introduction, in the section on the park, Generalife, comes a description in sound of the jasmine-scented gardens surrounding the Alhambra. Kislenko's interpretation was sensitive, thoughtful, reflective, extremely moving. Her attentive and appreciative rapport with the orchestra – she's the official pianist for the ensemble, they are all her colleagues – made for an intimacy between soloist and orchestra that was palpable and satisfying.

The second movement, A Distant Dance, describes exotic dancing taking place in an unnamed garden, perhaps viewed clandestinely. One gorgeous orchestral section after another deluged the listener in beauty and rhythmic excitement Saturday night. Superb brass ensemble work, fabulous string section blend, and rich color abetted Kislenko's expressive counterpoint. Segueing into the last movement, In the Gardens of the Sierra de Córdoba, Kislenko on many occasions appeared to be in the embrace of a soulful trance, her playing of simple repeating passages mesmerizing, genuine, in the spirit of the Sufi philosopher Ibn Masarra, who meditated in this garden. The last bars of the last tone poem drifting

away in a kind of rapturous diminuendo, the performance of this not often heard masterpiece was exquisitely rendered by orchestra and soloist alike.

Pianist Markus Groh joined Kislenko for Mozart's Concerto for Two Pianos in E-flat Major and a more perfect blend of color, interpretation, and voicing between two artists would be hard to imagine. Groh, whose career has grown by leaps and bounds since winning the prestigious Queen Elizabeth Competition in 1995 matched Kislenko in conversational exchanges between the two instruments, Kislenko's approach softer, gentler, his more marcato, but the two blending stylings in common intellectual agreement. The slow movement – expressive, leisurely – and the cheerful clip of the last movement, with its bravura cadenzas for both pianists, gave the audience a virtuoso performance that also winked with Mozartean fun.

After intermission, Groh returned to play Tchaikovsky's symphony for piano and orchestra, the Piano Concerto No. 1 in Bflat Minor, Op. 23. A riveting performance, Groh's accented and acutely rhythmic interpretation gave energy and excitement to the first movement. Holding his own against a huge orchestral sound, Groh was able without difficulty to offer thoughtful clarity to his playing. His cadenza at the end of the first movement, his superb exchanges with the orchestra's wonderful wind section in the second movement, and some really surreal, magically finessed passagework in the last movement gave this performance of Tchaikovsky's masterpiece a special radiance. Kudos to maestro Kabaretti for putting together a remarkably entertaining concert.