

# Symphony ends season in style

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The Santa Barbara Symphony, under the direction of Gisèle Ben-Dor, ended its 50th anniversary season with two crowd-pleasers: pianist Emanuel Ax and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Saturday night's concert at the Arlington Theatre was a festive affair, but the artistic results were mixed.

The concert began with Vaughan Williams' "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis," featuring the strings alone in soaring lines and exchanges between various groups of instruments. When all together, the ensemble sounded lush and emotive, supported by the especially resonant lower strings.

Passages with smaller groups of instruments, on the other hand, seemed tentative and less expressive. Entrances here were not always precise and in tune, despite Ms. Ben-Dor's large, aggressive motions. An exception to this were the string soloists, including violinists Miran Kojian and Gloria Autry, violist Kirsten Monke and cellist Geoffrey Rutkowski, who all played long, lyrical phrases.

Next, pianist Emanuel Ax appeared for Mozart's D minor concerto, K. 466, which he handled with supreme confidence and security. He communicated his lines eloquently, always with precision, a sparkling tone and a feeling of simplicity. His left hand's accompaniment figures lent a rhythmic excitement to the piece's overall

sound, even when joined by the full orchestra.

The other musicians, in turn, fed off Mr. Ax's energy. Immediately following his solos, they played with urgency and attentively matched his phrasing and articulation.

Unfortunately, this spirit seemed to dissipate after a while, with the overall sound losing its focus and the phrase endings their nuance. In these spots, the overall balance emphasized the repetitive chords and rhythmic figures in the winds, sometimes covering the piano's lines.

The musicians approached

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony with a more consistent level of playing. Ms. Ben-Dor conducted here with more freedom—from memory, and with a repertoire of gestures different from elsewhere in the concert. Her fluid movements in portions of the first and second movements allowed the music to flow and sometimes even to lilt. The musicians responded to her new attitude, with especially expressive work from the violas, cellos and basses.

As in the Vaughan Williams, Ms. Ben-Dor's approach was predominantly athletic. Because of the vigorous and rhythmic nature of this particular symphony, the technique worked relatively well. There were some places, however, including the delicate wind solos of the Andante, where her motions seemed too forceful for the character of the music.

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## musicreview



DAVID BAZEMORE PHOTO

Emanuel Ax played Mozart's D minor concerto with confidence, precision and a sparkling tone.