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SYMPHONY REVIEW

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It's All in the Feet

By [Mark Wardlaw](#)

It's a rare occurrence when a symphony orchestra devotes an entire half of a subscription concert to music that wasn't intended for a concert hall. On Sunday night Music Director Alasdair Neale and the Marin Symphony did just that, opening their 56th season with the innovative Quartet San Francisco and their tribute to the tango.

This concert had something for everyone, including a pair of internationally acclaimed dancers, a bandoneon soloist, and a first half that featured chestnuts by Rimsky-Korsakov and Ravel. This type of creative programming with multiple media should be considered a model for symphony orchestras all over the country that are endeavoring to build new audience bases.



Quartet San Francisco

Known for its successful crossovers into numerous musical styles, including jazz, pop, funk, blues, bluegrass, and more, Quartet San Francisco has enjoyed unusual success with its national and international performances as well as its Grammy-nominated recordings of sensuous dance music from Argentina. The quartet's putative leader, Jeremy Cohen, is quite clearly an extraordinarily creative musician. Nationally acknowledged as a leading jazz violinist, he also possesses significant gifts as a composer and arranger. His colorful orchestrations of tangos by Agustin Bardi, G.H. Rodriguez, and Astor Piazzolla — in addition to three of his own compositions — made possible this satisfying collaboration with the Marin Symphony.

The most compelling piece on the altogether entertaining program was the medley of two tangos by Piazzolla, whose name has become synonymous with this musical style. Pairing the slow and achingly beautiful *Melodia en La Menor* with the driving, energetic *Libertango*, Cohen conceived a tour de force that brilliantly displayed the tango's seductive charms. This is substantial music, featuring the bandoneon (a popular, accordion-like instrument from Argentina), played expertly and soulfully by guest artist Seth Asarnow, and dancers Sandor and Parissa (who enthralled the audience in two other numbers, as well), supporting a mesmerizing freestyle (nonchoreographed) tango.

While the *Libertango* sizzled with raw energy and superb playing by the quartet and the orchestra's string section, the *Melodia* imparted the real essence of the tango's beguiling character, with ravishing melodies and lush

harmonies that unfolded over a lazy, yet insistent, descending chromatic bass line. Cohen has enhanced the medley with a stunning original cadenza for solo violin that bridges the two tangos, and his flawless virtuosity was not lost on the rapt audience.

Fine Work by Quartet San Francisco

The quartet's playing was solid all night. Rodriguez's *La cumparsita* (apparently the most beloved tango of all) opened the program, with its sinuous unaccompanied duet played by Cohen and violist Keith Lawrence. However, the orchestra's playing in this tango wasn't as satisfying. Their rhythmic consistency and stylistic execution fell short of the authenticity offered by the quartet. In addition, the overall texture felt too heavy at times, compromising the intimacy of Sandor and Parissa's sultry choreography.

Al Colon, one of Cohen's original compositions, featured nimble playing by all the quartet's members, including a delightful variation in which the composer shows admirable facility in the style of Vivaldi. The orchestra sparkled on this arrangement, as they did on the finale *Guamba* (Cohen's clever title for this samba composed on the island of Guam). Principal clarinetist Art Austin, Concertmaster Jeremy Constant, and tuba player Jill Corbett contributed outstanding solo turns.

The first half concluded with an inspired reading of Ravel's *Bolero*. Numerous intermission conversations were sprinkled with inevitable references to the movie that made Bo Derek famous and relegated this masterpiece to novelty status. Yet the Marin Symphony's performance of this thrilling work reminded the wildly appreciative audience that this is a daring, bold, and singularly original piece, and one that must be experienced in a resonant concert hall like the Marin Center in San Rafael, the Symphony's home.

I never cease to marvel at Ravel's ingenious use of orchestral color, his audacious use of only two melodies with absolutely no variation, and his ability to create sustained, unrelenting intensity. All the soloists were in fine form. Maestro Neale was masterful in coaxing from the orchestra what must be the longest crescendo in the symphonic repertoire. His only oversight was his failure to recognize the contributions of piccolo soloist Holly Nichols for her duet with principal horn player Alex Camphouse. Ravel's scoring for this duo in parallel major thirds, evoking the unmistakable sound of a pipe organ, is an outstanding example of his skill as an orchestrator.

Special kudos to tenor saxophonist David Henderson, soprano saxophonist Sean Hurlburt, Art Austin for his solos on both B-flat and E-flat clarinets, and Kevin Neuhoff, who dispatched the marathon snare drum solo with great precision and artistry.

Mark Wardlaw is a clarinetist in the Santa Rosa Symphony and a jazz saxophonist. He conducts the Symphonic Band and two orchestras at Santa Rosa High School and is the jazz band director at Santa Rosa Junior College.

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Comments

A small oversight in the article... despite what the program may have stated the solo tuba player was a woman and clearly not Zachariah. Her solo was indeed beautifully played.

Posted by Jeff L on October 7, 2008 at 1:35 pm

Mr. Neale also neglected to recognize Principal Trumpeter Carole Klein for her lovely duet with the flute in

Bolero.

Posted by Mary M on October 7, 2008 at 4:00 pm

The female tubist should be recognized by name as were the other outstanding musicians.

Posted by Shawn C on October 7, 2008 at 4:14 pm

The name of the tuba player has been corrected.

- The Editors

Posted by getchesc on October 8, 2008 at 7:59 am

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