

Smart And Spicy

Music: A Little Gem of A Concert by Culver City Symphony

By Carole Bell

That's what Frank Fetta promised.

I agree. Last Saturday's concert by the Culver City Symphony glittered.

The orchestra had three rehearsals during the week; I watched them turn a plain room with folding door dividers into something lyrical.

The concert wasn't exactly a cliff hanger; just a relaxing way to spend an early summer evening, with reception afterward.

Fetta's had vast experience in music; he once made a recording with Igor Stravinsky.

"What was he like?" I asked.

"He was very stern. I was just a boy, 20, and he was 80. He could hardly move or see - but boy, could he hear!

"He was the greatest composer of the 20th century; how he changed music! To be in his presence – it was priceless!"

Playing piano since age five, Fetta has a Bachelor's in piano, studying instrumental and choral conducting at USC. He's conducted the Culver City Symphony for more than 40 years.

I was surprised at the collaboration among Fetta and orchestra as he rehearsed with 38 musicians. When at times, changes were suggested by the concertmaster or assistant concertmaster, Fetta immediately agreed.

I asked about his style.

"I started conducting at the tail end of the 'Tyrannical Conductor,'" he says. "It's more democratized now."

Leah Hansen played solo cello.

"Could such a young classical musician be compared with someone like Ariana Grande?" I asked.

"Leah is every bit as exciting and glamorous and well-trained as someone like Ariana Grande." Fetta added, "Pop singers draw more people because they don't require the same patience to watch as classical musicians."

"How does current American politics impact music?" I asked.

I was impressed at how Fetta broadened his answer.

"Any of the things that have been the civilizing forces in Western society, Trump wants nothing to do with. Civilized people don't behave like he does," Fetta said, characterizing Trump as "Mr. Crude in a suit."

A warning: "People need a true education in the humanities, arts and science, along with their specialty. If they can't get a panorama of an education, they wind up like Trump."

"He's playing with fire. Any administration that chooses what's on the government website based on how the government wants to shake people's minds away from truth is dangerous – you're only increasing people's ignorance."

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"No sneakers for men." At first rehearsal, they'd announced the dress code. "You can wear bits of color."

The concert was dedicated to the memory of Susan Fetta, Frank Fetta's wife of 41 years, who passed away recently.

In rehearsal, Hansen's cello was lively, not mournful. In jeans, tshirt, and high ponytail, she sat facing the orchestra; usually soloists face the audience.

"Play it shorter," Fetta directed. "Somebody's playing it too long." I watched Fetta shape *Haydn's Cello Concerto, D Major (1783)*. Fetta refined with soloist and orchestra; 35 minutes later, he called it "a good first reading."

"Let's look at the symphony, please."

"Let's do that *mezzo forte*...a little innuendo, I think that would be nice," purred Fetta.

Hansen indeed looked glamorous at the concert, wearing a long strappy black flowered dress. Fetta told the audience he'd known her since she was 11! Now 23, Hansen played on a little platform they constructed right in front of the audience.

Fingers vibrating, ponytail bouncing, Hansen's Haydn solo was nimble and young, animated, then much happier in the third movement where the cello switched from rich and dark to lighter, more dance-like. As Hansen played, you could see how hard she was concentrating, brow furrowed, playing forcefully; in the end, echoing woodwinds, finally, she gave a big smile. The audience clapped so much that she lovingly played a deeply-noted encore.

When they began playing Mozart, I pictured a Viennese minuet. *Mozart's Symphony No. 29, A Major (1774)* was charming. Here cat-and-mouse, then crescendoing, powerful. It was Mozart. Clearly. I felt comforted.

Intriguing interplay between violins and cellos, with playback, then pushback; both concertmaster and assistant concertmaster had big smiles.

They played Mozart passionately; Fetta conducting sinuously, orchestra on alert. Everyone looked pleased; it was, as Germans say, **sehr suss**.

Copland's Quiet City (1939), was cool and modern. I liked it better in concert; it changed since rehearsal, becoming sharper and more defined. You could hear American rhythms. Originally a play by Irwin Shaw, *Quiet City* draws a young trumpet player playing to express his inner emotions, arousing the audience's conscience. Copland was asked to compose the incidental music. Elia Kazan struggled to make the play successful, but it wasn't. Yet Copland's music survived, while the play is forgotten.

The trumpet-playing was magnificent, and with English horn, haunting at the end.

It was fun hearing *Danzas de Panama (1948)*, by William Grant Still; it's like a South-of-the-border piazza gone wild with swirls and break-out dancers. Think tiered skirts, smiles, and charming *señoritas*. The end was interesting, if cacophonous.

I saw recent Mayor Jim Clarke at the reception, looking quite happy with the evening's music.

"Why do you need people to come to your concerts?" I asked Matthew Hetz, President and Executive Director.

"Everybody who comes for the first time, they're amazed," Matthew told me. "People are quite taken with our orchestra. We create a good urban environment, a benefit for Culver City in every way.

"Why do you need money?" I asked.

"Music rental, paying musicians, renting the hall, paying for rehearsal space, insurance, printing costs, advertising, maintaining the website."

The Culver City Symphony is Culver City's resident orchestra. They need your help and your support, by donations, volunteering, or just coming to their concerts.

The orchestra looked quite elegant. Bits of red color sparkled here and there, in the formal dress bowties of several musicians; in the red headband of the first cellist; in the beautiful long scarf of a violist. It was a lovely, perfect concert for a summer night. And not a sneaker in sight.

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