

Sounds both rare and familiar

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Closing out its current concert season on a strong and musically supple note, on May Day night at the Lobero Theatre, the Santa Barbara Chamber Orchestra broached areas of both rarity and familiarity. The rarity factor came in the form of lending the guest soloist spotlight to a classical guitarist — and a wondrous one, Jason Vieaux — while the familiarity factor came in the form of virtually the only guitar concerto in that slender repertoire, Joaquin Rodrigo's beloved "Concierto de Aranjuez."

Opening the program on pleasant, decorative and retro terms, maestro Heiichiro Ohyama led his charges through Ottorino Respighi's "Ancient Airs and Dances, Suite No. 3." As the title implies, the picturesque-minded composer's piece, written in 1933, leans cozily backwards, tapping into musical modes of old. You sense Respighi's potent nostalgia at work, and a certain restless kitsch-making tendency. The second movement is a pocket-sized suite in itself, flitting from theme to theme, mood to mood.

Post-intermission, the orchestra dipped into another classical music "greatest hit," Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 4 in A Major, the "Italian." The score avidly plays major against minor modes, with the bold assertion of major brightness in the beginning yielding to minor by work's end, with the brooding second movement and simmering third in between. The orchestra fared boldly in this early romantic era ensemble showcase.

But clearly, the main attraction of the evening was the Guitar Moment, and this particular guitarist.

From the earliest passages of the concerto, it was clear that Mr. Vieaux is a commanding voice on his instrument, deserving greater recognition. With a microphone and small amplifier to help even the dynamic odds of the challenging guitar-meets-orchestra setting, he brought a persuasive clarity and a controlled emotionality to his playing of this standard of the repertoire, making it sound fresh and newly relevant.

There is also something contextually resonant about hearing great guitar playing on the Lobero stage, which has hosted Andres Segovia and the legendary Romero family of guitarists going back a half century, up through recent highlights like the Assad Brothers' performance here earlier this year. As Mr. Vieaux offered up a glowing encore of a solo piece by Isaac Albéniz, the Lobero/guitar accord rang true.

Having recorded music from the standard guitar literature as well as music of jazz great Pat Metheny and, last year, "nuevo tango" king Astor Piazzolla, Mr. Vieaux seems to bring a breadth of musical understanding and expression even to the Rodrigo chestnut which he must necessarily play on a regular basis.

Backed solidly and empathetically by our chamber orchestra, Mr. Vieaux proved lucid and masterful on the faster outer movements, but the deepest music came in the middle. Even after countless hearings in many forms, including Miles Davis' adaptation on "Sketches of Spain," the work's Adagio, one of the great languid melodies of the 20th century, has a power to move. That movement, alone, was handily one of the highlights of the SBCO season.

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CONCERT REVIEW