

San Francisco Symphony – Ton Koopman – March 2015

S.F. Symphony review: Ton Koopman vitalizes 18th century music

By **Joshua Kosman**

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Last season, the **San Francisco Symphony** brought in the Dutch conductor Ton Koopman to lead the orchestra in two stirring weeks' worth of music by members of the Bach family. For this year's visit, Koopman has moved forward in history just a tad, to the works of Handel and Haydn, and the results in Davies Symphony Hall on Wednesday night were every bit as invigorating.

At this rate, maybe we can look forward to Koopman's take on Stravinsky one of these years.

For the time being, though, Koopman's distinctive interpretive style — marked by crisp, propulsive rhythms and an expansive view of form — seemed perfectly well suited to the 18th century. This is an ingenious way to bridge the stylistic gap between the modern symphony orchestra, which is at heart a creature of the 19th century, and the music that comes from before its heyday.

The opening work on Wednesday's program, Handel's "Royal Fireworks Music," was a case in point. This is a bold public display, written for outdoor performance in celebration of a peace treaty with the French, and it strains at the bounds of a modern concert experience.

Koopman and the orchestra seemed to acknowledge that tension by giving the music plenty of extroverted vitality, while still maintaining a sense of proportion and balance. The broadly paced strains of "La Paix" ("Peace") — a nod to the diplomatic circumstances of Handel's commission — gained depth and sturdiness in Koopman's account, and the explosive strains of the subsequent celebration, marked "La Réjouissance" ("Rejoicing"), sounded all the more striking.

Haydn was represented by two of the fruits of his late sojourn in London, the Symphony No. 103 (“Drumroll”) and the oddly endearing Sinfonia Concertante in B-Flat. The latter piece has solo roles for no fewer than four instruments, and part of its charm is the deftness with which Haydn keeps the spotlight on all four of them in turn without slighting anyone.

If the violin soloist is perhaps a little more equal than others, that’s because the original performer was **Johann Peter Salomon**, the impresario who brought Haydn to England in the first place, and commissioned not only this piece but also the remarkable spate of symphonies that the composer turned out for an appreciative London audience. Associate concertmaster **Nadya Tichman** dispatched her assignment with forceful, willowy grace.

The other solo parts, too, were expertly delivered by cellist **Amos Yang**, oboist **Mingjia Liu** and bassoonist **Stephen Paulson**, with their work highlighted by supportive and thoughtful playing from the orchestra. The “Drumroll” Symphony built up a head of steam from the opening timpani salvo that gives the piece its sobriquet — Alex Orfaly lent it a fierce edge — and then spent the ensuing half hour sailing along on the resultant energy.

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San Francisco Symphony: 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, March 13-14. \$15-\$140. Davies Symphony Hall, 201 **Van Ness** Ave., S.F. (415) 864-6000. www.sfsymphony.org.