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Spotlighting symphony musicians

Music

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San Francisco Symphony Principal Trumpet Mark Inouye.

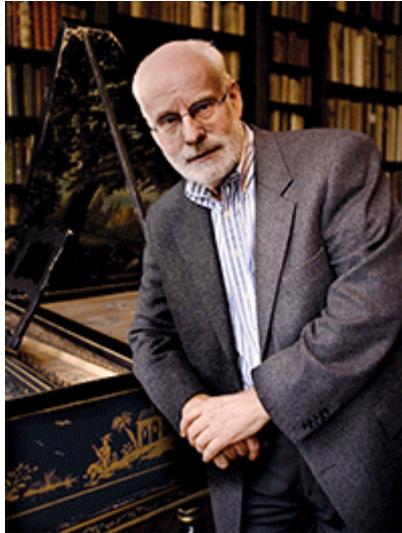
Photo: Courtesy SFS

Dutch conductor Ton Koopman has finished a two-week guest shot with the San Francisco Symphony at Davies Symphony Hall with concerts featuring players and principals drawn from the orchestra's own ranks. The sprightly maestro known from previous appearances for his expertise with music of the Baroque brought the playlist later into the Classical period during his most recent stay. Adding some sparkling interpretations of music by Franz Joseph Haydn to familiar selections from the late-Baroque George Frederic Handel of *Music for the Royal Fireworks* and *Water Music Suites* showed Koopman's fresh and authoritative viewpoint on all things 18th-century, and also offered soloists a deserved chance to spotlight their own skills.

One of the performances actually proved such a star turn it warranted a long and distinctly non-antique encore. Principal Trumpet of the SFS Mark Inouye followed his amazing triumph with Haydn's Concerto in E-flat Major with a smoking rendition of Antonio Carlos Jobim's *Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars (Corcovado)*, earning the gifted musician his second standing ovation of the evening.

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Guest conductor Ton Koopman. Photo: Courtesy SFS

The Concerto was Haydn's brilliant and daunting gift to players of a new model of keyed trumpet that could sound chromatic melodies using all the notes of the scale (virtually impossible on earlier instruments). The challenge didn't faze Inouye. He seemed capable of going on for the rest of the night, but Koopman still had the second half to showcase the entire orchestra in a wonderfully energetic and detailed Haydn Symphony No. 98 in B-flat Major.

During intermission, Principal Keyboard (since the Ozawa years) Robin Sutherland practiced his upcoming solo on the harpsichord. The quick run-through took a little longer than the actual 11 measures the composer wrote for himself to play at the premiere, but our familiar contemporary sat patiently (in shirtsleeves) at the back of the stage until his moment arrived. Standing and putting his tailcoat on, Sutherland moved to the harpsichord, where he made his charming contribution. It seemed every bit as fitting and droll as Haydn's own quick wit.

The week prior also featured well-known and admired members of the SFS in another Haydn delight, the *Sinfonia concertante* in B-flat Major. Mingjia Liu, Acting Principal Oboe; Stephen Paulson, Principal Bassoon; Amos Yang, Assistant Principal Cello; and Nadya Tichman, Associate Concertmaster and occupant of the San Francisco Symphony Foundation Chair since 1990, assembled beside Koopman to give the composer's typically inventive work new life.

If any of the soloists stands out a bit more in the *Sinfonia*, it is the violin, and Tichman applied her customary precision and sweetness of tone with her poised and stylish playing to make the most of the assignment. It would be great to see Koopman singling her out even more in a hoped-for future visit with an entire concerto essayed by her alone. Tichman's long tenure with the SFS has always been an example of the orchestra's high level of musicianship, and it was terrific seeing her in a bright red dress for a change!

Both weeks of programs opened with "outdoorsy" pieces by Handel. The first program got off to a suitably blazing start with *Royal Fireworks Music*, and the most recent bill featured the *Water Music* Suite No. 1 in F Major.

The *Fireworks* sounded raucous and showy (in a really good and exciting way) and was marred only slightly by some

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imprecise horn-playing. The rest of the band took Koopman's direction with the closest to "authentic" playing modern instruments can approximate.

The *Water Music* was far statelier in the slower movements, but it also blared forth with gusto. Written to be played on the water as the monarch traveled by barge (it really must have been good to be king), the Suite No.1 demands a certain volume to prove both audible and effective. Koopman and his SFS musicians gave refreshing vitality to a well-known and well-loved score.

When the conductor makes his next visit, maybe he will be inching closer to composers such as Mozart. Regardless of any new direction in repertoire, his practice of using orchestra members as soloists should remain. It is clearly a win-win formula for him, the musicians, and judging from the full houses and appreciative cheers, audiences as well.