

NEWPORT MUSIC FESTIVAL

French pieces reign in salute to Bastille Day

By Sandra Matuschka

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It is hard not to use superlatives in describing the concerts of the Newport Music Festival because they are all so uncannily excellent. Almost every concert is an experience not to be forgotten, quite a feat considering the number of concerts (64) and performers.

Sunday's traditional salute to Bastille Day was no exception. As might be expected, French composers took the roster in a mixture of selections that spanned the 17th through 21st centuries, and paid proper homage to the importance of the end of the French monarchy and the beginning of its first Republic with the storming of the French prison, the Bastille, on this day in 1789.

A seemingly unlikely duo of piano (Frederic Chiu) and French horn (Eric Ruske), provided the first bits of Francophilia with three pieces: "Andante" by the rarely performed Vincent d'Indy; "Villanelle," by Paul Dukas, and "Cantecor, Op. 77" by Paul Henri.

The combination of the two instruments filled the very corners of the ornate drawing room at The Elms, at times overpowering it in the "Andante" as the strident tones of the French horn echoed throughout. Dukas, best known for "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," offered an intriguing piece that had the horn uncharacteristically tripping lightly as Ruske coaxed the softest tones from it, and at other times brought the notes crashing down on the audience. Büsser, who lived to be 101, supplied a perfect blending of the horn's mellow

and sweet sound with occasional piano accelerando, both giving way to an exuberant and martial finish that filled the listener with an excitement usually reserved for full orchestra.

The lovely "Pièce V" by César Franck brought Festival General Director Mark P. Malkovich III to the front of the audience to explain that "of all the thousands of pieces we've played, this is my favorite. It was originally meant for oboe and piano. And although we say we never repeat anything, it's true — except for this piece." True justice was done the selection by pianist Alain Jacquon and flutist Göran Marcusson as the tremulous metallic edge of the flute anchored well the otherworldly air created by the duo.

Paul Taffanel's "Andante Pastorale et Scherzettino" was a cheerful lilting selection that allowed the flute's virtuosity to shine with tremolos and trills, as well as deep and resonant tones. The entire effect carried the listener to what well could have been some pastoral glade.

A surprising and festive arrangement of Marin Marais' "Le Basque" gave a chance for all three performers to compete musically with great fun in a tempo accelerating piece that swept the happy audience with it. Malkovich took to the front of the room again to exclaim, "This was originally just for the French horn, and I thought 'Wouldn't it be nice if one took one part, and one the other,' but little did I expect something like this! I'm so happy to share it with you this morning."

Completing the program's

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Sandra Matuschka photo

Eric Ruske plays the French horn during the Bastille Day celebration held Sunday at The Elms in Newport.

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first half, Jacquon gifted the audience with Francis Poulenc's "Les Animaux Modelés (The Model Animals)." This colorful suite for piano taken from ballet, dreamily slipped away into a world of chords and tones guaranteed to resonate deeply into one's being. The demanding eight-part selection presented auditory pictures of dawn, love and many of the animal kingdom, including jumping grasshoppers, bears, roosters and amorous lions. Masterful piano artistry coaxed the best from wood, strings and striking hammers, magically evoking pictures of raw emotion tamed to sophistication, softly creeping joy and radiance segueing to discord with intimations of darker things to come, then moving back to peaceful and melodic harmonies. Altogether, the piece as played was a triumph of passion and technical expertise.

And, then the whipped cream and cherry on this Sunday treat. Violinist Nai-Yuan Hu and pianist Chiu combined to provide a

rousing finish with the four-part "Sonate, Op. 6" of Alexis Castillon, one of the founders of the Société Nationale de Musique. Hu's masterful technique was fully engaged in this complex piece, especially in the Allegro molto as rapid hand position changes interspersed with pizzicato, long rich vibratos, and upgraded into short, staccato bursts complementing the piano's insistent accompaniment. Likewise, the music required Chiu to provide a lengthy and constant keyboard attack in concert with Hu.

The andante portion of the sonate revealed in rich, sonorous violin phrases backgrounded by a persistent throbbing piano. That moved to an emotion-grabbing intensity of violin-piano melody that poured out into the acoustical space of the room, becoming an entity unto itself. The two musicians made more than beautiful music together—they became music. The audience was the richer for it, and showed its appreciation with a standing ovation.