

All-Strauss menu is plenty filling

By Jean-Pierre Barricelli

SAN BERNARDINO

As a programming idea, an all-Richard Strauss concert might sound a bit on the rich side — like fudge on a dessert tray. One piece should be enough.

The San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra carried off the tour-de-force Saturday evening in the California Theatre for the Performing Arts by opening and closing with two orchestrally opulent numbers, the "Don Juan," Op. 20 (1889) and the 1945 suite from "Der Rosenkavalier," Op. 59.

The in-between was filled with the Horn Concerto No. 11 in E flat, Op. 1, and the Wind Serenade in E flat, both of 1882 — compositions which in terms of instrumental volume and size do not engulf the listener in voluptuous sound.

The richness of the "Don Juan" and "Rosenkavalier" selections, however, promotes its own difficulties, which the orchestra, under the baton of Stewart Robertson, was unable to overcome. Voluptuous sound can turn into confusing sound when it is improperly articulated and when

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the middle substance of the score is left relatively unattended in favor of the upper and lower sonorities. For, in Strauss especially, the middle substance too carries the thematic lines, or fragments of them, producing a web of lone colors. The intricacy needs close monitoring. Without this, balance disappears in a wash of instrumental noise, of scrambling to reach the security of one note.

Though challenging as an opener, the "Don Juan" fared better than the "Rosenkavalier." The latter pleased the audience — those waltz motifs are always wonderfully engaging. But with irresolutely slow tempos and undramatic contrasts, Robertson sacrificed the piece's energies, including the gay lilt, to the nostalgic mood of what in the opera is Marschallin's sadness over the loss of her youth (the "Mirror" aria, one of the piece's themes).

What the rich works lacked in rendition,

the other works made up for. Both belong to Strauss's early period. Both received fine performances. The serenade is a gem of shifting moods and kaleidoscopic tone colors, amazingly full for the few musicians involved. Here articulation is of the essence, and her Robertson directed the ensemble successfully along many expressive pathways. The rarely performed composition was a treat of elegance and serenity.

Even more so was the horn artistry of Eric Ruske. The concerto, while devoid of Strauss's characteristic melodic flair, gave Ruske the opportunity to display his compelling virtuosity. He did not miss a note; his tones were clean; he did not mar them with wet sounds (one of instrument's liabilities). If he could have warmed them in the appropriate passages with more lyricism, he still communicated them with steadfast assurance. A superb job!

Jean-Pierre Barricelli has been reviewing classical music for The Press-Enterprise since 1963.