

Sonoma Index-Tribune

Midsummer Mozart concert at Buena Vista

MARTIN SNAPP

SPECIAL TO THE INDEX-TRIBUNE | July 9, 2018



When renowned conductor George Cleve, whom poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti called “one of the great Mozart interpreters of our time and place,” died three years ago, there was considerable fear that the Midsummer Mozart Festival, which he founded in 1974 with the crème de la crème of local classical musicians, would die with him.

And indeed, the signs were not promising. Without Cleve’s star power, many major underwriters headed for the hills. But one group of people stubbornly refused to let it die — the musicians themselves, led by concertmaster/first violin Robin Hansen.

Starting practically from scratch, they cobbled together enough donations to underwrite two concerts last summer — one in Sonoma, the other in San Francisco — and both were artistic triumphs. Not only is the festival back again this summer, they’ve found a new conductor — Paul Schrage, the brilliant music director of Symphonia Caritas and, by no coincidence, Cleve’s last student.

“I wrote him a letter and sent him a DVD of some of my conducting, and I said ‘I’d love to study with you,’ but I didn’t hear anything back from him. I thought, ‘Maybe he never even opened it.’ But six months later I saw him again at the Midsummer Mozart Festival, and at the reception afterwards he sees me from across the room and shouts, ‘Paul Schrage! I saw your video! Yes, I will teach you!’”

So what did Schrage and others learn from the maestro?

"When George was conducting, he seemed to hold the sound of the music in his baton in a way that doesn't often happen," says Schrage. "Not just the notes, but also the space between the notes. It was very subtle."

"It was like he was painting the music with his baton," adds Hansen. "But he trusted the musicians to connect the dots, riding the waves of the music. He was always in the moment."

The festival has some mighty tasty offerings this year: Symphony No. 17, the gorgeous "Linz" Symphony No. 36, and the Violin Concerto No. 3. This last features talented young violinist Ani Bukujian, who just won the coveted position of Principal Second Violin of the San Francisco Ballet.

Bukujian has been playing since she was 2½, when she'd stand in front of the television with a toy violin her grandmother gave her and do her best impressions of Itzhak Perlman and Sarah Chang. For this concert she'll perform her own cadenzas for each movement of the violin concerto, which she composed when she was a student at Juilliard.

Buena Vista Winery in Sonoma will host the concert on July 14 at 6:30 p.m. There will also be a chamber concert starting at 12:30 p.m., on Oct. 23 in San Francisco at Old St. Mary's Cathedral.

For more information and tickets, visit midsummermozart.org. That's also where you can donate to keep this Bay Area treasure going. They hope to raise enough this year so that next year there can be a concert in Berkeley too.

"Expect the same high standards," says Schrage. "Same great, upbeat atmosphere; same joyous music-making. Not a lot is going to change."