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Farewell to Nadja

Music

by Philip Campbell

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New Century Chamber Orchestra turned silver last week with a three-concert 25th Anniversary Festival, celebrating an amazing Bay Area legacy of quality performances, adventurous programming and enthusiastic public support.

The happy partnership joined the conductorless ensemble in 2008 with Salerno-Sonnenberg's electrifying lead from the concertmaster's chair to create a rich blend of shimmering sound and an instantly recognizable brand name.

The first concert in the Festival (all three presented in the beautifully restored Herbst Theatre) appropriately focused on writers who have contributed works to the Featured Composer program.

Snippets from some of the noteworthy composers were performed with commentary from a panel formed of Salerno-Sonnenberg; NCCO Executive Director Philip Wilder; Alecia Lawyer, Founder & Artistic Director of Houston's River Oaks Chamber Orchestra; and San Francisco Conservatory of Music Dean and Provost Kate Sheeran.

Selections from Pulitzer Prize winners Ellen Taaffe Zwilich and William Bolcom took pride of place at the beginning and end of the bill, and longtime collaborator Clarice Assad (contributor of many successful arrangements for NCCO) took the spotlight with "Impressions," a clever showcase for the five sections of the Orchestra and the individual musicians.

Jennifer Higdon is already known to Northern California from her work with the San Francisco Symphony (catch her lovely "Blue Cathedral" on YouTube with Stephane Devane conducting).

Mark O'Connor's "Song of the Liberty Bell" from a PBS documentary and Derek Bermel's easily listenable "Murmurations" (co-commissioned

New Century Chamber Orchestra bid adieu to Music Director Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg. Photo: Courtesy NCCO

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by NCCO, River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra and partner A Far Cry), showed New Century's inclusive appeal to a broad audience.

Michael Daugherty is more in-your-face with his aptly titled "Strut," but Salerno-Sonnenberg noted it is fun to play, and it was definitely fun to hear. Lena Auerbach's string Symphony "Memoria de la Luz" offered a beautifully wispy melody for a violin solo. Nadja's warm, rounded and tangy tone is ideal for so much in the ensemble's repertory.

I skipped the final concert in the Festival for another commitment, while regretting missing Clarice Assad's terrific arrangement of Gershwin's "An American in Paris Suite." Her gorgeous setting sums up everything right about the nine-year marriage. I got another chance to see it, albeit marveled at the hitch with the middle concert of the Festival.

"I was split into two sympathetic works, Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" and Astor Piazzolla's "Four Seasons of Buenos Aires." Salerno-Sonnenberg has a long association with the former piece, and has recorded the latter with NCCO for NSS Music. With her sometimes-quirky and always fervent performance style, Nadja added an astringent vitality to the "Four Seasons," and even better, to Piazzolla's tango-tinged four de force suite.

When the concert ended, Nadja received a proclamation presented from the Mayor's office, naming May 20, 2017 in her honor. The audience gleefully joined in, shouting out "whereas" when cued at the top of each paragraph. We were feeling a little verklempt, but enormously grateful. The encore "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" said it all – in music, of course.



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