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Solano Winds closes season with delightful 'Anniversaries'

FAIRFIELD — The Solano Winds closed its 16th season with another wonderful concert last weekend.

The eclectic yet accessible program opened with a spirited rendition of John Philip Sousa's "The Federal March."

This engaging, if not widely known work featured bright, crisp playing by all, though with especially clear articulation from the trumpets, clarinets and flutes.

- Solano Winds Community Concert Band
- 'Anniversaries' concert
- 4 stars out of 4

A transcription by Kenneth Singleton of Gioacchino Rossini's "The Barber of Seville Overture" kept the energy high. Clarinets in concert bands often function similarly to violins in orchestras. The Winds' clarinets did so here, seamlessly switching from forthright statement of melody to rapid figures around the music of other sections.

Moving from the high-spirited to the somber, and from the familiar to the little known, conductor Bill Doherty led the Winds through a restrained yet powerful reading of Norwegian composer Johan Halvorsen's "In Memoriam, Opus 30," written to honor his friend, poet Bjornstjerne Bjornson.

The brooding trombones that opened the work soon gave way to a poignant melody that built gently until interrupted by a thunderous roll by timpanist Wally Hunt. The melody returned, however, and, softly but inexorably grew to conclusion both sorrowful yet resigned.

The audience was then treated to a cheerful performance of Leroy Anderson's "Buglers Holiday" in an arrangement by Michael Edwards. Trumpet soloists Heather Handa, Bob Bacchus and Jack Hanes, standing at the front of the stage, gave a bravura display of double-tonguing and breath control, and earned enthusiastic applause from audience and band members alike.

The first half of the program closed with Walter Beeler's transcription of Aaron Copeland's "Lincoln Portrait," the narration provided with appropriate gravitas by Solano Winds tuba player Dick Grokenberger.

Copeland himself chose the passages from Abraham Lincoln's speeches and letters included in "Portrait," whose resolve and wisdom were enhanced by orchestration alternately blunt and stately.

Doherty's authoritative conducting elicited an understated yet powerful sound from the Solano Winds.

Bacchus played with deceptive simplicity in several solo passages, while Bill Aron on oboe exploited the difficult balance of the warm and expressive with the nasal possible to his instrument to great effect.

The second half opened with Robert Russell Bennett's bright, high-spirited, even humorous "Suite of Old American Dances."

The clarinets and saxophone sections were responsible for much of the dash and vigor of the piece, as well as for the lush tone in the last section.

Next was Australian-born Percy Grainger's arrangement, which, thankfully, included no bagpipes, of the Scottish folk tune "Ye Banks and Braes O' Bonnie Doon."

The Winds' lyrical reading of this short piece infused it with a slight, yet somehow pleasurable, melancholy.

Moving from the modest to the grand, we heard the "Les Miserables: Selections" by Claude-Michel Schonberg and arranged by Warren Baker. The Winds' confident, polished performance was effective throughout, including some passages by trumpeter Jack Hanes that displayed a lovely, singing tone. Most moving, however, was Linn Benson on horn, playing with his distinctive elegant reserve.

Frank Ticheli's, "An American Elegy" was written in honor of the victims and survivors of the 1999 Columbine High School massacre. Classically melodic, sounding almost orchestral in parts, and including a four-part canon, the piece eschews easy emotionality in favor of dignified resolve.

Ticheli fully explored the contrast between the reediness of the woodwind section with the round, full tone of the horns, trumpets and trombones. Aron on oboe and Rafael Figueroa on bassoon wove in, out and through melodic lines with great beauty and power, while Handa, playing her trumpet from off stage, brought the work to a serene close.

The program closed with Francis McBeth's "This Land of El Dorado," written in honor of longtime California State University, Fullerton band director Benton Minor. Tubas, euphoniums, bass clarinets and baritone saxophones played with throbbing intensity, while tenor and alto saxophones, clarinets and flutes developed a melody containing more than a little Spanish flavor.

Finally, Doherty gave in to audience desires, and we had an encore. "Melody Shop," by Karl L. King, featured Delbert Bump, Ray Cabral and Lee Horton, the often overlooked euphonium section, displaying a consistently clear tone and nimble finger work as they engaged in a seemingly nonstop display of rapid runs up and down the scale.

Despite euphoniums being among the lowest-voiced instruments in a concert band, the concert, and the season, ended on a high note.

The Solano Winds continue to delight audiences with concerts combining music familiar and obscure, serious and light-hearted, accessible and challenging. Longtime listeners and new fans alike look forward to next year's offerings.

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