

OVERNIGHT REVIEW: Grams, Porter make impressive debuts at Pasadena Symphony concert

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Pasadena Star-News/San Gabriel Valley Tribune/Whittier Daily News



One of the advantages of the long interregnum between Pasadena Symphony music directors is that local audiences have heard a number of young conductors who are forging strong careers with orchestras in the United States and abroad. Saturday brought the last of those young maestros as Andrew Grams (right) took the podium at Ambassador Auditorium.

The 36-year-old Baltimore native was recently named music director of the Elgin Symphony Orchestra in suburban Chicago, an ensemble that is similar in size to the PSO. Grams reportedly was the unanimous choice of the ESO's musicians and it's easy to see why. He has an enthusiastic, energetic conducting style and, as he showed in the opening piece Saturday night, a cheeky sense of humor, as well.

For William Bolcom's *Commedia for (Almost) 18th Century Orchestra* Grams tucked a trio of string soloists high on the back row of the orchestra, where percussionists would normally sit. Midway through their first solo lick, Grams turned to the audience and pointed to the soloists with a sly smile, as if to say, "Did you find them?" It was an appropriately light touch to Bolcom's mashup of styles that range from Baroque to Mahler to slapstick.

Grams was all business in the final piece for the evening, Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, although at the end of the first movement he peeked over his shoulder and smiled as if to say, "It's okay to applaud." Overall, Grams took things at a brisk pace, although he also found time to luxuriate in the woodwind solos that permeate the uber-familiar work. The orchestra was in top form throughout most of the performance.

In between those two pieces came Max Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1, with 17-year-old Simone Porter as the soloist. A native of Seattle, Porter studies with Robert Lipsett at The Colburn Conservatory of Music in downtown Los Angeles. She is also part of

Colburn Artists, a program created in 2012 by The Colburn School to provide professional management services to its most-accomplished students, and Saturday night Porter validated her selection.

Playing a 1742 Camillus Camilli violin, Porter displayed a sweet, yet rich tone throughout the concerto, not just in the low notes but on the upper strings as well. She attacked this familiar work with exuberant, youthful gusto and seemed to thoroughly enjoy the moment, listening and bouncing along with the orchestral accompaniment when she wasn't playing. It was an impressive performance; she is clearly someone to keep an eye and ear on.

Grams and the orchestra offered rich, luxuriant accompaniment, particularly during the broad, romantic moments of this familiar work. I hope that representatives of the Long Beach Symphony, which is searching for a new music director, were in the audience. Grams should be on their candidates list.

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- Porter's PSO appearance is one of several important local concerts for her this year. On April 27 she will play Beethoven's *Romances 1 & 2* with the Pacific Symphony, led by Carl St.Clair, at the SOKA Performing Arts Center in Aliso Viejo. On Sept. 4 she will make her Hollywood Bowl debut as soloist in Samuel Barber's Violin Concerto with the Los Angeles Philharmonic conducted by Seattle Symphony Music Director Ludovic Morlot.
- The final concert of the PSO's 2013-2014 classics season will be held May 10. Jahja Lang, long-time music director of the San Diego Symphony, will lead a program of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 and Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1, with Shai Posner as soloist. [Information](#).
- Audience members got the first public look at the PSO's 2014-2015 season. Music Director David Lockington and Principal Guest Conductor Nicholas McGegan will alternate leading the five classics series concerts, with Lockington conducting the first, third and final program and McGegan leading Nos. 2 and 4. Opening night is Nov. 1. I'll have more on this tomorrow in a Blog post.

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