

USC Thornton Symphony – *Pictures at an Exhibition*

Seeing is Beguiling

HIS PURE WHITE MANE DANCED ENERGETICALLY as conductor Carl St. Clair entered the Granada Theatre stage last weekend to conduct the USC Thornton Symphony Orchestra in an all-Russian program that included Glinka's *Overture* to the opera *Ruslan and Lyudmila*; Tchaikovsky's monumental masterpiece, the *Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 23*, with pianist Daniel Pollack, and Ravel's stunning orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The occasion was a special concert sponsored by Montecito Bank and Sarah

DANIEL KEPL
MUSIC REVIEW

and Roger Chrisman, to show off the Granada's new state-of-the-art back screen digital projection system. Also on display, incredibly professional playing by the USC Thornton Symphony Orchestra, USC faculty pianist Daniel Pollack's unquestioned intellectual authority and technical prowess in the Tchaikovsky concerto, and the Fantasia-like marvel of the 15 animations created by USC School of Cinematic Arts



Greeting **Tom Sito**, Chair and Professor of the John C. Hench Division of Animation and Digital Arts at the School of Cinematic Arts, USC is **Carolyn Chrisman**, recent USC graduate of new animation program Cinema School with parents **Sarah** and **Roger Chrisman**

animation students under the direction of Michael Patterson and Candace Reckinger, for *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Conductor and Artistic Director of the USC Thornton Orchestra Program as well as long-time conductor of the Pacific Symphony in Orange County, St. Clair is in demand around the world for good reason. The vitality and clarity of his stick technique, his unabashed intensity of purpose and message, conveyed through every sinew of his body, charge St. Clair's concerts with excitement. Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila* a warhorse that can as easily fall flat as soar depending on the helmsman, was kept on a steady course, allowing plenty of leeway for the orchestra's fabulous string section to glimmer and glow, balanced perfectly in rich, cleanly articulated brass and wind colors: a wonderfully vibrant performance.

Pianist Daniel Pollack is a formidable presence on stage. Tall, huge-handed, a contemplative intellectual, he is also heroic in demeanor. His approach to Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1* was Beethovenesque in its roiling, brooding, dark intensity: exactly so.

Pollack's sound was huge, his no-frills edgy playing punctured complacency, musically as well as psychologically. The orchestra's horn section opening of the first movement was ethereal, Pollack's first movement solo cadenza, electrifying. The gorgeous slow movement became a meditation in Pollack's interpretation, St. Clair channeling a walking pace from the orchestra. The concerto's last movement found

orchestra, soloist, and conductor in interpretive synchronicity, an exhilarating performance.

After intermission what everybody in the hall had been waiting for, a visual and aural spectacular; the Ravel orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, with animations for all 15 sections of the work created by students at the USC School of Cinematic Arts for the opening in 2011 of Michael Tilson Thomas' pet concert hall project, the New World Center in Miami. Saturday and Sunday's presentation had not been seen since the New World Center opening. The Granada Theatre's setup was different from the multi-screen capability in Miami. An enormous, stage-wide panoramic screen hovered just above the orchestra. With the Granada's state-of-the-art digital screen projection capability, the animations were clean and clear, the orchestra using stand lights. An even more important technological advance was taking place in the orchestra. A new member, his instrument an iPad, controlled the pace of the animations to exactly match the artistic whims of conductor St. Clair. The animations followed the music, not the other way around. The verdict: an utterly enchanting 30 minutes or so of great music, superbly played by the USC Thornton Symphony, to brilliant re-visualizations of the paintings of Viktor Hartmann. Win-win.



The USC Thornton Symphony and **Carl St. Clair**, Conductor and Artistic Director during the screening and performance of *Pictures at an Exhibition*



Five of the eleven attending USC Animation Graduates and Students: **Carolyn Chrisman**; **Barney Patterson**; **Melissa Bouwman**; **Scott Winters**, Museik inventor and company CEO; Visual Directors **Michael Patterson** and **Candace Reckinger**; **Alessandro Ceglia**; and **John Gutman**

AN ENTRANCED GATHERING OF PATRONS, including Sarah and Roger Chrisman whose daughter Carolyn animated one of the segments, gathered before last Saturday's Granada Theatre performance by the USC Thornton Symphony Orchestra of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* to hear USC School of Cinematic Arts co-animation directors, Michael Patterson and Candace Reckinger, explain the process by which they selected students and graduates to animate each of the 15 segments of Mussorgsky's masterpiece for the opening in 2011 of the New World Center in Miami.

Key to the success of the project, Patterson and Reckinger explained, was the detailed collaboration they enjoyed with conductor Michael Tilson Thomas over several months, as they honed a cohesive animated fantasy to match each of Viktor Hartmann's 15 paintings using state-of-the-art digital technology. Patterson and Reckinger discussed another innovative new technology, Museik, invented by conductor Scott Winters, which controls the animations so that they are in synch with the live orchestra experience and the artistic pace of conductor Carl St. Clair. Museik permits in-the-moment interaction between the orchestra and the animations.

Daniel Kepl has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews for Santa Barbara publications since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor.

See more **Photos by Priscilla**, ©2015, SantaBarbaraSeen.com
Contact her at priscilla@santabarbaraseen.com • (805) 969-3301