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## Orchestra delivers an ambitious, spirited 'Fiesta!'

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Notice was served, and the audience responded.

The occasion was the opening of **Downey Symphony's** 2011-2012 season, its fourth under Music Director Sharon Lavery, Saturday night at the Downey Civic Theatre.

The program was the big news: not one work from a 19th-century master, but instead a world premiere of a work written for the **Downey Symphony** along with another American premiere. It was a concert that was challenging musically and intellectually - not your everyday local musical experience.

The concert was titled "Fiesta!" in part because the orchestra wants to reach out to the growing Latino audience with works by Spanish and Mexican composers. And the program, with one French exception, was all Spanish and Mexican.

It was intriguing, effective, engaging and more than occasionally brilliant.

This is the kind of music you want to hear, and the **Downey Symphony** is willing to make it available.

The one work on the program that gave a nod to the old symphonic literature was the last: Ravel's "Bolero," written by the French composer in 1928 in a Spanish style and subsequently called by him "a work for orchestra without music."

There may be some truth in that assessment but with or without music, orchestras have played the work simply because it is a challenge of remarkable proportions, from the continually repeated rhythm of the drum to the individual instrumental parts.

Especially noteworthy were Chris Bartz on two saxophones and principal trombonist Grant Hungerford. Scott Babcock played the snare drum, the key to the work, with precision and was assisted by Mike Deutsch and Damion Frigilliana, and timpanist Danielle Squyres. Lavery kept a steady beat as the crescendo grew to its final climax.

The evening began with two works by Spanish composer Oscar Navarro, the U.S. premiere of his orchestral poem "Noah's Ark" and, to begin the evening, the "Downey Overture," written by the composer as a gift to the orchestra.

The "Overture" was a remarkably potent piece of orchestral music, fusing sections of stark power with jazz influences and sometimes a Latin beat. The

work sounded, in places, a bit like an imagined traffic jam, hectic and jumpy and perhaps not quite what suburban Downey is like. It was a success with the orchestra and the audience (and a little of the work's finale was offered by Lavery as an encore at evening's end).

"Noah's Ark," nearly 20 minutes long, is an impressive work for orchestra, telling the whole story of Noah from God's words to him at the beginning, to the discovery of the new land at the end, told seamlessly but with musical divisions.

Lavery had the divisions displayed on one concert hall wall in Spanish and English while the orchestra played in segments that represented "The Life of the Sea," "Noah's Family" and "The Birds," among others. The work was modern but easily understandable, brilliant and powerful. The composer, present in the audience, was convinced to come onstage for a bow.

Before intermission, the orchestra played "Danzon No. 2" by contemporary Mexican composer Arturo Marquez, a short but exuberant orchestral dance marked by Latin rhythms and plenty of percussion, another delicious contemporary work.

After intermission, guitar soloist Tim Calobre, just 18, joined the orchestra for the "Concierto de Aranjuez" by Rodrigo. His guitar was unnecessarily amplified, making it louder than the orchestra in places where it should have been part of the ensemble, but it didn't impact the young man's mastery of the technical challenges of Rodrigo's masterwork, save for a few slightly misplayed notes.

Calobre's emotional skills were not quite up to his technical ones, but given a few more years he will be someone audiences will be clamoring to hear.

With his guitar disconnected from the amplifier, Calobre offered a brief solo encore, "Fandanguillo" by Joaquin Turina, played with a delicious simplicity that included chords played by slapping the guitar strings.

**Downey Symphony's** next concert, set for Jan. 28, is called "Strings Spectacular" and features a chamber-size orchestra with music by Vivaldi, Percy Grainger, Mozart and Dvorak.

John Farrell is a Long Beach freelance writer. More of his articles can be read at <http://byjohnfarrell.typepad.com>.

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