

Tango goes to the symphony

Festival showcases music's potential

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When it comes time to write the history of maestro Gisele Ben-Dor's illustrious career heading the Santa Barbara Symphony, at least two distinctive events will stand out.

Five years ago, she offered an ambitious championing of an underdog, Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas. This year, in the last full season of her 10-year tenure, Ms. Ben-Dor showed us the artistic reckoning force of tango music, and the Argentine spirit generally.



Her "Tango and Malambo Festival," mounted in collaboration with various arts groups around town, culminated in a fascinating and defiantly offbeat symphony concert last weekend at the Arlington Theatre.

This symphony program was a refreshing detour from the usual warhorse parade. The longish program, heard on Saturday evening, consisted of music by late, great Argentine composers Alberto Ginastera and Astor Piazzolla, and the very much living composer Luis Bacalov. Mr. Bacalov's Triple Concerto for bandoneon, piano and soprano -- in its U.S. premiere here -- showed how tango, dynamic orchestral thinking, lyricism and cerebral musical adventurism can be natural bedfellows. That's no easy feat, but the composer, and the symphony, pulled it off.

Mr. Bacalov is best known for a vast background in film scoring, including his Oscar-winning music for "Il Postino."

He played the piano part for this concert work, in collusion with supple bandoneon player Juanjo Mosalini and lucid-toned soprano Virginia Tola. The work wends through vigorous, syncopated orchestration passages, introspective asides and variations on the vocabulary of tango with tonal and rhythmic tension keeping it from ever being played straight.

Dissecting and fragmenting the language, Mr. Bacalov seems intent on searching for new ways to deal with tango within an orchestral context, with insightful and flamboyant

results. Ms. Tola's romantic sonorities suddenly appeared from her surprise perch on a balcony above the stage, helping to resolve a feisty piece with a gentle denouement.

Mr. Mosalini's captivating bandoneon sound rang out resonantly over the orchestra all night, just as it was a core presence in a quartet format on the festival's "Story of the Tango" program Thursday night at UCSB. At the Arlington, Mr. Mosalini demonstrated how this now tango-identified button accordion graduated, as Pablo Aslan explained on Thursday, "from the German church to the bordellos of Buenos Aires," and now, logically, to concert hall status.

Ginastera's music has never graced Santa Barbara venues as densely as it did during the festival, offering ample evidence of his significance. His complete "Estancia" ballet was the key attraction on opening weekend's Santa Barbara Ballet performance. A suite from that sometimes ecstatically forceful piece opened the symphony concert, all the more powerful for its live performance rather than the recorded version heard for the ballet.

A sampling of Ginastera's piano music was heard on Thursday, played gustily by Eduardo Delgado, and his Overture for the Criollo "Faust" opened the second half of the symphony concert. In this work, played with considerable focus and flair by Ms. Ben-Dor and her charges, echoes of such towering modernists as Bartok and Stravinsky blend in with indigenous Argentine colors. The endemic Euro-Argentine connection is deftly confirmed, in musical terms.

Historical fascination outweighed musical worth with one of the program's highlights, the first performance of Piazzolla's "Tres Movimientos Sinfonicos" since its Buenos Aires premiere in 1953. The piece is bold but also tentative in conception and orchestration, especially compared with the Bacalov work.

What's important to remember is that it's something of a portrait of the artist as a young man, still torn between the worlds of classical composition and extending tango tradition into the world-renowned "Nuevo tango" form he went on to master.

For an encore, Ms. Ben-Dor brought out Piazzolla's sad jewel, "Oblivion," a beautiful piece in which Mr. Mosalini's pining, sparingly ornamented bandoneon melodies laid atop a hauntingly simple, ascending string line. The audience seemed to float out of the Arlington, heads nicely packed with angular tango provocations, sensuous energy and a final wafting of melancholic luster.