Bad Boy Plays Bach

Organist Cameron Carpenter, undisputed master and mohawk-donning maverick, brings his ‘bad boy of the organ’ to the Granada Theatre
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5 Cameron Carpenter ‘Bad Boy of the organ’ plays tribute to Bach
6 Chicago Iconic horn band returns to Santa Barbara
7 Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment with Violinist Nicola Benedetti performs all-Beethoven
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8 The City of Conversation Ensemble Theatre’s ode to a lost political art

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SPOTLIGHT ON LA CUNETA SON MACHIN

This weekend, Santa Barbara County is host to a rare visit from a respected band from Nicaragua, in the form of Grammy-nominated La Cuneta Son Machin, as part of the Viva el Arte de Santa Barbara concert-workshop residency series. In keeping with the series’ multiple-venue structure, the band performs free concerts in Isla Vista, Guadalupe and a grand finale at Marjorie Luke Theatre on Sunday, with educational ops in the margins of their visit. Hailing from Managua, the young band departs from the more electronic and pop-centric sounds of its contemporaries, preferring to dig into the rootsy soil of Nicaraguan folklórico and nueva canción (new song) movement, with a band sound featuring marimba, classical guitar and flute, along with requisite percussion. 7 p.m. tonight at Isla Vista School, 6875 El Colegio Rd, Isla Vista; 7 p.m. Saturday at Guadalupe City Hall Auditorium, 918 Obispo St, Guadalupe; and 7 p.m. Sunday at Marjorie Luke Theatre, Santa Barbara Junior High, 721 E. Copa St. The show is free. 893-4979, https://artsandlectures.ucsb.edu/Community/VivaElArte.aspx

— Josef Woodard

SPOTLIGHT ON ENGELBERT HUMPERDINCK

The artist known as Engelbert Humperdinck (born Arnold George Dorsey, in 1936) joins the ranks of other veteran artists — including Tom Jones, Burt Bacharach and Tony Bennett, all who have graced Santa Barbara stages — who refuse to rest on ancient laurels or go easily into the Golden Years, and are enjoying appreciation from young, newcomer fans along with older diehards. Mr. Humperdinck, who returns to the Chumash Casino tonight, celebrates the old and new during his 50th anniversary tour with a new album, “The Man I Want to Be” (dedicated to his wife, Patricia, who suffered from Alzheimer’s), and takes on contemporary, next generation tunes such as recent Grammy-sweeper Bruno Mars’ “Just the Way You Are” and Ed Sheeran’s “Photograph.” No doubt, he’ll also call up the classic hits, like “Quando, Quando, Quando,” “After the Loving” and “Release Me.” 8 p.m. tonight. Chumash Casino Resort, 3400 East Highway 246, Santa Ynez. Tickets are $45 to $65. 800-248-6274, chumashcasino.com.

— Josef Woodard
Organist Goes Big, Goes Digital

FAMED ‘BAD BOY OF THE ORGAN’ CAMERON CARPENTER PERFORMS LOCALLY ON THE HEELS OF HIS ACCLAIMED ALBUM ‘ALL YOU NEED IS BACH’

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent

Cameron Carpenter, the undisputed master and mohawk-donning maverick-showman, is an artist of many monikers. He has been dubbed “the bad boy of the organ” for his idiosyncratic style, rock star-like manners, and tours with his massive, custom-made International Touring Organ and a forest of speakers which fills a stage (literally and sonically) and requires a semi to transport, just like the rockers. Except that his recent album was “All You Need is Bach,” a passionate tribute to the greatest of organ composers.

He has also been called a great white hope of contemporary organ music, for his impressive ability to bring this otherwise obscure art form to a broad public, along with his serious music repertoire mixed in with film music, originals and transcriptions by the truckload.

Among his achievements thus far are his status as the first solo organist to earn a Grammy nomination, appearances with top orchestras and a fascinating charisma carried onto the stage — as he will with his return visit to The Granada Theatre on Monday, hosted by UCSB Arts & Lectures.

Of course, controversy is no stranger to Mr. Carpenter and vice versa, and purist pipe organ aficionados find his brash revolutionary attitudes off-putting, but not to mention the technological basis of his personal keyboard. Some have called him the “King of False Organs” given that Mr. Carpenter’s instrument isn’t an organ in the ancient sense, but a fully digital instrument based on digital samples — clones, in a sense — of great organs from around the world.

One of the reasons that solo organ music hasn’t had more of a public profile as a concert instrument, despite its grandeur and versatility, is its site-specificity. Pipe organs require and feed off the acoustic resonance of the very room and pipe-housing itself such as churches and concert halls. The Walt Disney Concert Hall’s organ, for one, is a wonderful mother of an organ, but what is played there, stays there.

Mr. Carpenter has logically presented a solution with his megasampler ground control console. While cumbersome to transport, with his International Touring Organ he is able to import great organ sounds — or at least digital facsimiles thereof — anywhere they’re hiring and listening. And that, thankfully, has included our own Granada.

In many ways, Mr. Carpenter’s radical life and persona in music was built on some fairly traditional building blocks. A child prodigy, he earned two degrees at Juilliard and served as organist for the Middle Collegiate Church in NYC a decade ago, despite his being an avowed atheist (a not so uncommon condition for organists vying for church work — one of the last bastions for professional organ music). But this organist followed his heart into some trailblazing and unconventional directions, including the creation, and continuing refinement, of his own mega-digital beast.

In a recent interview, Mr. Carpenter discussed a highly original adventure in progress, in his usual outspoken manner.

News-Press: I was happy to hear that you’re headed back to Santa Barbara, after catching your impressive concert at the Granada two years ago. I came to you with a slightly skeptical attitude — as a fan of site-specific analog pipe organ music — but was won over by what you have done, digitally. Do you find that this conversion process happens often with organ music lovers?

Cameran Carpenter: It’s difficult to say, because organ music lovers (to the degree that they exist) are a highly biased, opinionated group of listeners, usually with deep loyalties to ideas of tradition rather than progress. And because of my relationship to technology and to the organ of both future and past, I try to maintain a purposeful ignorance on these opinions, so that they don’t cloud my own ideas of the organ and music-making, as they have in the past.

NP: What will your concert in Santa Barbara consist of — an eclectic mix of music, as heard before?

C: Certainly. In general, I expect to play music by JS Bach, Leonhard Bernstein, Robert Schumann, Liszt, and perhaps something by Schubert and a modern piece or two. But the only things I have really decided on are positions for the organ’s pedals and the soloist role in the Bach.

NP: Have you been losing your album “All You Need is Bach” virtually? I actually believe in that notion. Of course, Bach is a cornerstone of organ repertoire, and maybe organ music consciousness, and you have the complete Bach organ works at the ready. We Bach always a passion for you?

C: Passion is always a difficult word to deal with, in that it can mean so many different things. And while I’m often passionate about music as a medium, that’s not always true in the same way of individual works. Of course, the root of passion is suffering, and in the case of Bach — who even in his horror is utterly structured, exquisitely or “divinely” proportioned, and complete to a degree that seems un-human — passion is actually not my first emotion. Perhaps it sounds strange, but I feel passion’s usually in the physical experience and activity of playing Bach’s music, and weirdly not necessarily in the music itself.

My idea of Bach is not an idea of a person but simply a force. Because of this, I don’t greatly think about him. I tend to consider and regard each of his works as individuals and I treat them as such in my playing. The works are themselves the justification for this approach;

Carpenter

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Music as Healing, Gathering Force

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent

Music lovers in Santa Barbara have become so accustomed to the seasonal nature of the summer-time Music Academy of the West program that it was a bit disorienting last weekend to catch several Academy faculty and alumni in performance at Hahn Hall. But then, this off-season event was something very special and timely, a quickly-assembled and unusually emotional “Concert for Recovery and Hope,” presented free-of-charge to a capacity audience which recently recovered from January 9 mudslide/debris flow devastation.

As the Music Academy’s Scott Reed explained, the concert program was the result of rallying efforts and contributions from musicians connected to the academy, who traveled here from various locales for the event. The fact of the Music Academy location in and deep connection to Montecito led to the solicitude of Hahn Hall as one of Santa Barbara’s finer small concert halls — added to the significance and resonance of the concerts (held on Friday night and Saturday afternoon).

After the tragedies," said Mr. Reed, "it feels special to gather here at Hahn Hall. It’s often difficult to put feelings into words, so we’re going to let the music speak.

Fittingly, this small feast of chamber music opened with Schubert’s “An die Musik (To Music),” with its opening lines “You, noble Art, in how may grey hours/When life’s mad tumult wraps around me/Have you kindled my heart to warm love/Have you transported me into a better world/Transported into a better world.”

The list of accomplished and mature musicians included well-known cellist Joshua Roman, whose performance of Arvo Part’s “Traces,” with pianist Natsuki Kislenko, struck a chord of elegiac depth. Soprano Julie Aylward and da Capo vessels Margaret McDonald opened the concert with the Schubert and closed with Bernstein’s “Somewhere,” from “West Side Story.”

As might be expected, there were elegies and other lamentations on the program, when the French bassist Nico Abondolo played 19th-century composer Bottesini’s “Elegy.” Mr. Kislenko played Rachmaninoff’s Elegie, Opus 3, No. 1; and hornist Julie Landsman performed Kogani’s “Kaddish,” based on the Jewish prayer of mourning. Clarinetist Richie Hawley’s impassioned reading of the famed adagio from Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto, with Mr. Kislenko at the keyboard, touched on a deeper level than usual.

The Drummers Have It, for a Change

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent

Before the LA Philharmonic made its annual appearance in Santa Barbara, thanks to the nearly year-long hosting assign of CA Phil’s typically microphone-shy and heroic maestro Gustavo Dudamel broke with tradition to offer a special message to our tragedy-haunted community. Extending condolences and compassion to the city, he commented, “We’re honored to be sharing our music with this beautiful community. In moments like this, we know the true meaning of community.”

As an addition to the existing program, he opened with Leonard Bernstein’s “Divertimento,” and dedicated it to “those lost in this terrible tragedy.”

While civil senses were inevitably distracted by the Montecito tragedy, the music seemed to be a palatable desire in the house to transcend that reality. The LA Phil, who can always be counted on to deliver a powerful orchestral sound and program intelligence, was just the right ticket for a culturally dark moment outside of disturbances.

This year’s LA Phil show, in fact, was something extra special, as part of a world premiere weekend of principle percussionist Joseph Pereira’s brand new percussion orchestra work, “Threshold,” in the centerpiece position of the program. It was preceded by the salty fine opener of Stravinsky’s pre-Diaghilev-era 1908 “Fireworks, Opus 4,” and capped off by the comfort food feast of Brahms’ First Symphony, radiantly diced out, after intermission. But this program was mostly all about an eloquent equal moment in the spotlight for intelligent contemporary percussionists.

This new work by Mr. Pereira, a widely respected orchestral percussionist who was brought into the LA Phil fold in 2007 during Esa-Pekka Salonen’s stellar tenure and (and a faculty member of the Music Academy of the West), shows the composer’s palette of percussion and its connection to the orchestral organism, but also feeds off current social and political tensions. He who hath wrought it, also is an integral part of its realization, with the composer on timpani, flanked by the two percussionists — Tim Palmer and Jason Huxtable — making up Maraca2.

As Mr. Pereira writes in a note about the piece, “Whether you agree with current issues or not, we are living in a polarized climate.”

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