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Review: Pasadena Symphony's David Lockington signals new direction

Flamboyant, British-born music director David Lockington brings a bold vitality to the orchestra in his debut concert at the helm of Pasadena Symphony.

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Pasadena has changed little over the past half-century. What's new, of course, is Old Pasadena. But much of the city remains recognizably old Pasadena.

That has certainly been true of the Pasadena Symphony as a bastion of tradition. It was founded in 1928, and between 1936 and 2010 it had only three music directors. All arrived having had distinguished careers and remained for a long time. Even the orchestra's home throughout those years, the Pasadena Civic Auditorium, maintained its old-Pasadena feel.



David Lockington conducts the Pasadena Symphony Saturday at the Ambassador... (Kay E. Kochenderfer)

Now there is a new Pasadena Symphony and Pops. It plays in the acoustically superior Ambassador Auditorium, and from the evidence of a long search trying out promising young conductors, the Pasadena Symphony looked to be seriously intent on remaking its stodgy image.

In the end, the Pasadenans bucked the youth trend, sticking with experience. On Saturday, British-born David Lockington — who has headed a number of U.S. orchestras, including in Grand Rapids, Mich.; Modesto, Albuquerque and Long Island, N.Y. — led his first concert Saturday as the Pasadena Symphony's new music director.

The first thing to report is that at the matinee (there was also an evening performance Saturday), the orchestra played superbly for Lockington. The second thing to report is that, although it is too soon to tell, this probably will in fact become a new Pasadena Symphony. Lockington is a far more flamboyant music director than this orchestra has ever known.

The program itself was full of show. It opened with Shostakovich's flashy "Festive" Overture and Leonard Bernstein's "Serenade," a violin concerto with Anne Akiko Meyers as soloist. The real showpiece, though, was Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." As Lockington acknowledged in his introductory remarks to the audience, surely many had heard a "Rite" this year, so frequently has it been programmed to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the ballet's famed Paris premiere.

A new music director clearly wanted to demonstrate what he could do.

Lockington's in-your-face podium style is like that of an excitable football coach egging on his players. He asks for exceptionally sharp-edged rhythms, and accent markings get his full attention. His gestures are spacious and fervent. His facial expressions are not subtle.

Rose Corrigan's emotionally ripe bassoon solo set the stage for Lockington's "Rite." He brought out colors and musical shapes in a way that reminded me of what I like to do to with snapshots on Photoshop, ratcheting up the tint, exposure, contrast, highlights, vibrance (that bassoon solo to be sure), hue, saturation and luminescence to make everything pop. When it came to saturation and sharpening, Lockington's stayed on maximum.

It was a Romantic "Rite" and a power "Rite" rather than a revolutionary one. Still, the performance was bold enough to keep it from sounding old-fashioned. The orchestra struggled slightly with the explosive "Sacrificial Dance" at the end, but the main impression was of a "Rite" teeming with vitality.

Lockington, likewise, made a splash with Shostakovich's "Festive" Overture, which is the point of a celebratory work dashed off by the composer in 1954 as a tribute to the 37th anniversary of the October Revolution. It was a controversial composer's effort to at least momentarily soothe the Soviets.

Bernstein's Serenade was also from 1954 and from a time when the composer was undergoing his own political trials, fearful of being called up by Congress' notorious House Un-American Activities Committee

for his left-wing sympathies. It is the only major work from that period when he was blacklisted in the U.S., and it had its premiere in Venice, Italy, with Isaac Stern as soloist.

For all that, the Serenade is a love song, taking its inspiration from Plato's dispensations about Eros in the "Symposium." The concerto is sweet, complex, jazzy, virtuosic for the soloist and sentimental — in other words, a Bernstein dazzler.

As with the Stravinsky, this was not a performance in the mold of the composer's. Stravinsky liked his ballet score to sound uninflected. Lockington inflected. Bernstein's Serenade, when he conducted, dripped with opulent, sexy emotion.

Here, though Lockington, while hardly stifled, yielded mainly to Meyers. She displayed ravishing tone and sure technique in a clearly plotted performance that respectfully let Bernstein be. He probably wouldn't have let her get away with that for a moment.

Where Lockington will ultimately lead the orchestra is anyone's guess. His programming in Grand Rapids and especially Modesto is admirably varied and up to date, which was once more the case with the Pasadena Symphony than lately. But Saturday was Lockington's only appearance with his orchestra this season. The real work begins in a year.

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